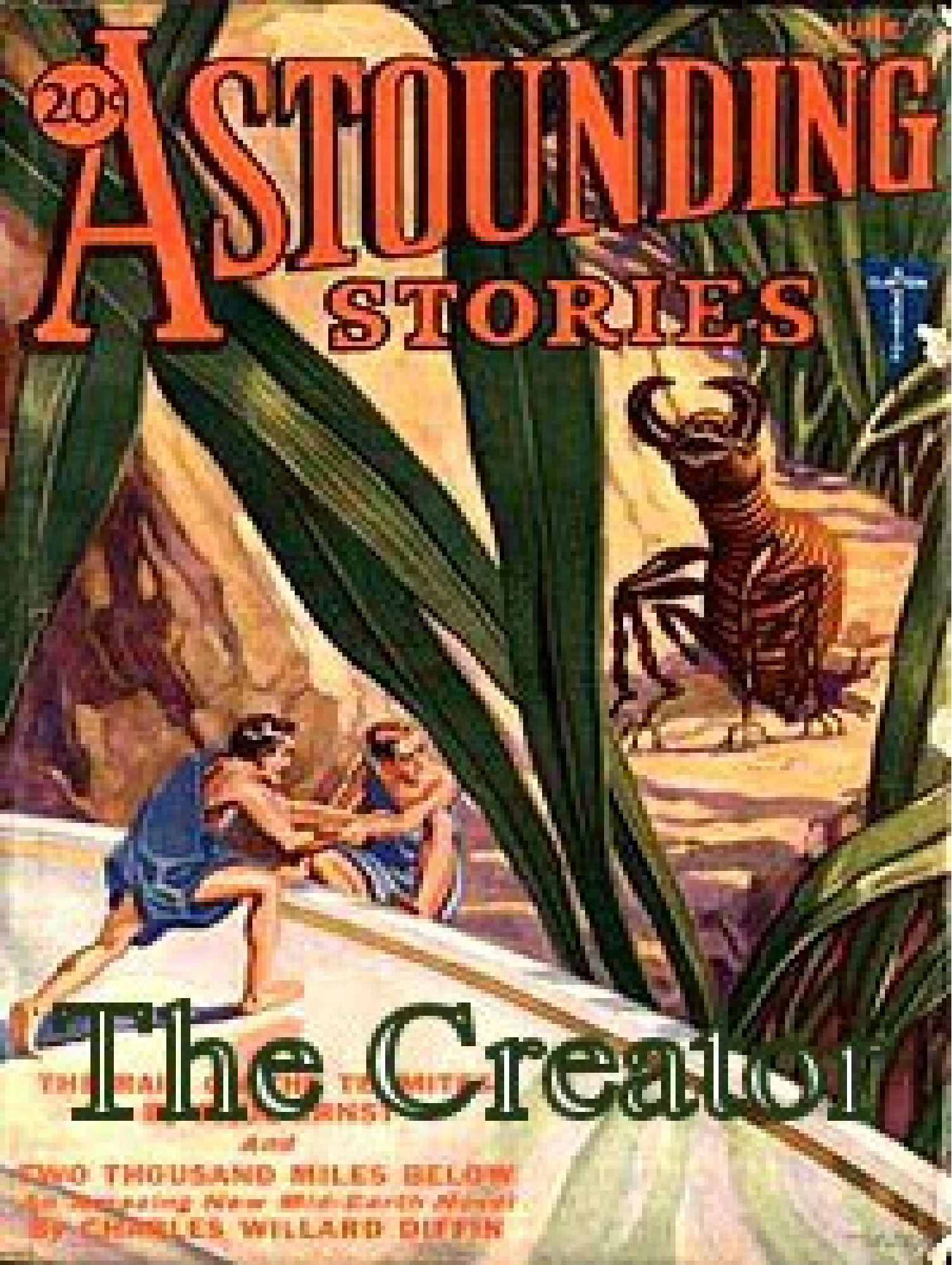
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ASTOUNDING
STORIES
The Creator
And
TWO THOUSAND MILES BELOW
By CHARLES WILLARD DIFFIN

The Creator and Other Stories
Clifford D. Simak
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Introduction

This is the sixth collection of the short stories of Clifford D. Simak that I have had the privilege and pleasure of editing. The pleasure lies in being able to reveal the stories to the modern science fiction audience. Some of these tales have been included in collections assembled by Cliff himself or by others, but those collections (which I myself in my time eagerly bought) are now not available. Some tales

are from my own library, some are mined from the magazines through the assistance of Joyce Day of the Science Fiction Foundation (to whom UK sf lovers should be grateful), and others have come from the considerable collection of a fellow-enthusiast here in Aberdeen. To him I owe a considerable debt.

The privilege lies in being able to work with the stories of one of my favourite authors. I well remember the trepidation with which I first wrote to CDS, the courtesy of his reply, and then meeting for breakfast in Hopkins House Motor Hotel in Minnetonka/Minneapolis in 1981. I was nervous and he was (I think) slightly anxious lest he had made a mistake in allowing access to this Scottish academic lawyer. But we got on well: our interests and enthusiasms meshed - so did our dislikes. He bore me off to his house and I still recall asking if the Way Station had anything to do with Andrew Wyeth's painting 'Christina's World' and the joy with which Cliff dug out from a pile of books on the coffee table in front of us an album of Wyeth's paintings. It was indeed so: Way Station is not unconnected with that weatherbeaten-grey slatted house on the rise above the meadow.

We corresponded for the rest of Cliff's life, with all the affection of shared interest and enjoyment. I still cannot bring myself to erase from my computer disc the letter I wrote on 26 April 1988, speaking of the spring: two days later a colleague asked if I had seen word of Cliff's death. Cliff must have died as I was writing. The news was carried in the Press and Journal, a newspaper circulating in the northern half of Scotland, and a full obituary ran in the London Times (a courtesy extended first to James Blish in 1975 and two weeks after Cliff to Robert Heinlein).

Like others I grieved for the passing of one whose niche in sf is unique, and the flavour of whose tales has never been approached. Indeed, the Simak style has never been successfully emulated. Not for nothing has he been termed the pastoral poet of sf. His voice, his way of looking at things and the quiet sanity and morality of even his most abstruse flights of fancy, were unique in his lifetime. Modern sf would

be the healthier were someone filling his shoes, but, though there is some promise, I see no true successor to CDS. Were justification needed - and it is not, for the tales stand on their own - that alone would justify these collections.

CDS's skill as a weaver of tales is incontrovertible. He was a newspaperman for the bulk of his long working life, yet, despite a very busy and successful professional life he published over two hundred stories and twenty-seven novels. City of 1952 and Way Station of 1963 are perhaps the best known novels. City won the International Fantasy Award in 1953 and his other awards and nominations from the sf writing and the sf reading communities include three Hugos (for The Big Front Yard', 1959; Way Station, 1964; and The Grotto of the Dancing Deer', 1980) and a Nebula (for The Grotto of the Dancing Deer', 1980 - which also won the Locus short story award for that year). In 1977 he received the Nebula Grand Master award of the Science Fiction Writers of America as well as the Jupiter Award (for A Heritage of Stars, 1977). Cliff retired in 1976, but kept on writing, his last novel being Highway of Eternity (1986). He died in April 1988.

I said CDS's skill as a weaver of tales is incontrovertible. The wording was deliberate, for it is the story not the style that usually sticks in the mind. His style is workmanlike, efficiently transmitting ideas but no more. Unlike some more modern writers, in CDS the style is not part of the experience. On the contrary, the unobtrusiveness of his writing reflects his professional training and serves to enhance the ideas he offers. It is the style of the story-teller of old, grasping your attention without histrionic display.

The ideas, the people and the Simak locations (often the countryside) linger in the mind. Like all good tellers of tales, one forgets the precise words, but the flavour of the story persists. In Tolkein's terms the story becomes myth, for the story remains while its precise formulation in words vanishes.

Practice alone will not produce good stories which so transcend their immediate vehicle. A basic skill is needed, though that is a skill

which itself needs to be honed by frequent practice. Cliff was always thinking of stories - in his last letter to me he spoke of regret that he had not the strength to write, but he was enjoying thinking of fresh stories. He had done that from an early age, his brother Carson often being the audience.

CDS was formed by his early life in the rural communities of south-west Wisconsin. He was born on the ridge country of Millville township above the Wisconsin river. He was reared on his father's farm there, and the 'stone house' his father built still gazes over to Prairie du Chien. He was educated in Patch Grove, and taught school for a few years in other small communities in the neighbourhood. All that grounded his country of the imagination, 'Simak Country', which is as real as the inventions of others. I have gone over this ground, guided by friends, by Cliff's instruction and by his brother Carson, and it is startling and instructive to recognise some scenes precisely as delineated, and in others to see how the artist has shifted and shaped to his requirements. In this collection, The Thing in the Stone' is embedded m the Platteville Limestone of Simak coutry, and Cat Den

Point and the tree to the cave, although moved laterally, are features of the Simak farm.

Simak country is also the people that live there. Not for nothing does Daniel find his place in a rural community as he flees 'All the Traps of Earth'. Nor is it an accident that those who know The Answers' live simply. The caring and an underlying respect for traditional ways and moral values which suffuse most of the stories can be traced to rural community life. On the other hand the raw evil that can also lurk in the country community is also known and exposed in, for example, the Adams family in The Thing in the Stone'. And, from a different side - Cliffs long interest in government - there is Brown and Russell in 'Party Line'.

One reads stories for different reasons. In this collection I have tried to provide a representative 'buffet' for various tastes and requirements. For fun try 'Reunion on Ganymede' and The Money

Tree'. For relaxation: try 'All the Traps of Earth'. But, having made my selection, I am conscious that most of the stories here touch something deeper. Cliff usually has a secondary (or primary, but concealed) element, an interest which he approaches most fully in the novels A Choice of Gods and Project Pope. There is a questioning and a probing of fundamental matters - What is it all about? and, What am I for? There is also the notion of some higher power, being or purpose. Theologically these are the questions of the nature of existence together with the sense of the numinous, but CDS presents them in story form - a medium which can often be more illuminating than the tomes of the professionals. Consider 'Death Scene' and The Answers' as a pair. They involve a serenity which has its own loveliness whether or not that is how you yourself would react to the facts of the story.

CDS was not always serene in his attitude to such questions. The Creator' is very different. In its time it was notorious. CDS wrote it in 1933 or '34 after he had more or less decided that his dalliance with sf was over. The editor W.L. Crawford persuaded him to write one more. It was not the first time CDS had brushed with the orthodoxies of religion (see The Voice in the Void' of 1932), but this presentation of God as a none too pleasant experimental scientist eventually killed by his creation was, for its time, startling. And, though it bears the stamp of its era, and though it is a product of a young writer, it stands as a stimulus to thought even today.

At the other end of the book, look at The Thing in the Stone'. Here an archetypal Simak hero makes friends with what ... the faithful pet of something that may be close to being a fallen angel?

But that story also is typical of CDS's work. Wallace Daniels is hurt, his wife and daughter taken from him by an accident which injured him as well and has given him an ability to see and move in the past. He has retreated to the (Simak) farm among the hills, and walks the ridges, fields and streams. (Cat Den Point, as I said, was on the Simak farm.) In the cave he becomes aware of the Thing, trapped

and dreaming. He is trapped there by the malice of man and yet attempts to help whatever it is he can 'hear', and thus gains himself both a friend and rescue from his own predicament. This is pure Simak. Theme and counterpoint, pacing and orchestration - unmistakable and satisfying.

Other familiar Simak elements are in these pages. In 'Party Line' there are the Listeners to the Stars, people you would find in Ring Around the Sun (1952) or Project Pope (1986). Indeed in both 'Party Line' and Project Pope a Mary finds heaven, though how differently in the story here. Again the robot, Richard Daniel, ranks with Jenkins, Hezekiah and Cardinal Theodosius, and Doctor Kelly, the country doctor has other incarnations in other stories.

And ever and again there is the idea, the image, the thought that strikes deep. Allow yourself to consider Richard Daniel on the outside of the spaceship heading through hyperspace and becoming one with the Universe. Consider also his new ability to see and adjust diagrams. How will he benefit his new home? Go from there to 'Shotgun Cure' and think again - is intelligence a disease we would be better to have cured? Would you decide as Doc Kelly does?

I regret that there will be no more Simak stories; that he was not able even to put on tape the thoughts of his last few months. But here is a representative selection of his legacy to us. I hope you will enjoy them.

F. Lyall.

Aberdeen, Scotland. August, 1993.

The Creator

FOREWORD

This is written in the elder days as the Earth rides close to the rim of eternity, edging nearer to the dying Sun, into which her two inner companions of the solar system have already plunged to a fiery

death. The Twilight of the Gods is history; and our planet drifts on and on into that oblivion from which nothing escapes, to which time itself may be dedicated in the final cosmic reckoning.

Old Earth, pacing her death march down the corridors of the heavens, turns more slowly upon her axis. Her days have lengthened as she crawls sadly to her tomb, shrouded only in the shreds of her former atmosphere. Because her air has thinned, her sky has lost its cheerful blue depths and she is arched with a dreary gray, which hovers close to the surface, as if the horrors of outer space were pressing close, like ravening wolves, upon the flanks of this ancient monarch of the heavens. When night creeps upon her, stranger stars blaze out like a ring of savage eyes closing in upon a dying campfire.

Earth must mourn her passing for she has stripped herself of all her gaudy finery and proud trappings. Upon her illimitable deserts and twisted ranges she has set up strange land sculptures. And these must be temples and altars before which she, not forgetting the powers of good and evil throughout the cosmos, prays in her last hours, like a dying man returning to his old faith. Mournful breezes Play a hymn of futility across her barren reaches of sand and rocky ledges. The waters of the empty oceans beat out upon the treeless, bleak and age-worn coast a march that is the last brave gesture of an ancient planet which has served its purpose and treads the path to Nirvana.

Little half-men and women, final survivors of a great race, which they remember only through legends handed down from father to son, burrow gnomelike in the bowels of the planet which has mothered their seed from dim days when the thing which was destined to rule over all his fellow creatures crawled in the slime of primal seas. A tired race, they wait for the day legend tells them will come, when the sun blazes anew in the sky and grass grows green upon the barren deserts once again. But I know this day will never come, although I would not disillusion them. I know their legends lie, but why should I destroy the only solid thing they have left to round out their colorless

life with the everlasting phenomena of hope?

For these little folks have been kind to me and there is a bloodbond between us that even the passing of a million years cannot erase. They think me a god, a messenger that the day they have awaited so long is near. I regret in time to come they must know me as a false prophet.

There is no point in writing these words. My little friends asked me what I do and why I do it and do not seem to understand when I explain. They do not comprehend my purpose in making quaint marks and signs upon the well-tanned pelts of the little rodents which overrun their burrows. All they understand is that when I have finished my labor they must take the skins and treasure them as a sacred trust I have left in their hands.

I have no hope the things I record will ever be read. I write my experiences in the same spirit and with the same bewildered purpose which must have characterized the first ancestor who chipped a runic message upon a stone.

I realize that I write the last manuscript. Earth's proud cities have fallen into mounds of dust. The roads that once crossed her surface have disappeared without a trace. No wheels turn, no engines drone. The last tribe of the human race crouches in its caves, watching for the day that will never come.

FIRST EXPERIMENTS

There may be some who would claim that Scott Marston and I have blasphemed, that we probed too deeply into mysteries where we had no right.

But be that as it may, I do not regret what we did and I am certain that Scott Marston, wherever he may be, feels as I do, without regrets.

We began our friendship at a little college in California. We were naturally drawn together by the similitude of our life, the affinity of our natures. Although our lines of study were widely separated (he majored in science and I in psychology), we both pursued our education for the pure love of learning rather than with a thought of

what education might do toward earning a living.

We eschewed the society of the campus, engaging in none of the frivolities of the student body. We spent happy hours in the library and study hall. Our discussions were ponderous and untouched by thought of the college life which flowed about us in all its colorful pageantry.

In our last two years we roomed together. As we were poor, our quarters were shabby, but this never occurred to us. Our entire life was embraced in our studies. We were fired with the true spirit of research.

Inevitably, we finally narrowed our research down to definite lines. Scott, intrigued by the enigma of time, devoted more and more of his leisure moments to the study of that inscrutable element. He found that very little was known of it, beyond the perplexing equations set up by equally perplexed savants.

I wandered into as remote paths, the study of psycho-physics and hypnology. I followed my research in hypnology until I came to the point where the mass of facts I had accumulated trapped me in a jungle of various diametrically opposed conclusions, many of which verged upon the occult.

It was at the insistence of my friend that I finally sought a solution in the material rather than the psychic world. He argued that if I were to make any real progress I must follow the dictate of pure, cold science rather than the elusive will-o'-the-wisp of an unproven shadow existence.

At length, having completed our required education, we were offered positions as instructors, he in physics and I in psychology. We eagerly accepted, as neither of us had any wish to change the routine of our lives.

Our new status in life changed our mode of living not at all. We continued to dwell in our shabby quarters, we ate at the same restaurant, we had our nightly discussions. The fact that we were no longer students in the generally accepted term of the word made no iota of difference to our research and study.

It was in the second year after we had been appointed instructors that I finally stumbled upon my 'consciousness unit' theory. Gradually I worked it out with the enthusiastic moral support of my friend, who rendered me what assistance he could.

The theory was beautiful in simplicity. It was based upon the hypothesis that a dream is an expression of one's consciousness, that it is one's second self going forth to adventure and travel. When the physical being is at rest the consciousness is released and can travel and adventure at will within certain limits.

I went one step further, however. I assumed that the consciousness actually does travel, that certain infinitesimal parts of one's brain do actually escape to visit the strange places and encounter the odd events of which one dreams.

This was taking dreams out of the psychic world to which they had formerly been relegated and placing them on a solid scientific basis.

I speak of my theory as a 'consciousness units' theory. Scott and I spoke of the units as 'consciousness cells,' although we were aware they could not possibly be cells. I thought of them as highly specialized electrons, despite the fact that it appeared ridiculous to suspect electrons of specialization.

Scott contended that a wave force, an intelligence wave, might be nearer the truth. Which of us was correct was never determined, nor did it make any difference.

As may be suspected, I never definitely arrived at undeniable proof to sustain my theory, although later developments would seem to bear it out.

Strangely, it was Scott Marston who did the most to add whatever measure of weight I could ever attach to my hypothesis.

While I was devoting my time to the abstract study of dreams, Scott was continuing with his equally baffling study of time. He confided to me that he was well satisfied with the progress he was making. At times he explained to me what he was doing, but my natural ineptitude at figures made impossible an understanding of the

formidable array of formulas which he spread out before me.

I accepted as a matter of course his statement that he had finally discovered a time force, which he claimed was identical with a fourth-dimensional force. At first the force existed only in a jumble of equations, formulas, and graphs on a litter of paper, but finally we pooled our total resources and under Scott's hand a machine took shape.

Finished, it crouched like a malign entity on the worktable, but it pulsed and hummed with a strange power that was of no earthly source.

'It is operating on time, pure time,' declared Scott. 'It is warping and distorting the time pattern, snatching power from the fourth dimension. Given a machine large enough, we could create a time-stress great enough to throw this world into a new plane created by the distortion of the time-field.'

We shuddered as we gazed upon the humming mass of metal and realized the possibilities of our discovery. Perhaps for a moment we feared that we had probed too deeply into the mystery of an element that should have remained forever outside the province of human knowledge.

The realization that he had only scratched the surface, however, drove Scott on to renewed efforts. He even begrudged the time taken by his work as instructor and there were weeks when we ate meager lunches in our rooms after spending all our available funds but a few pennies to buy some piece needed for the time-power machine.

Came the day when we placed a potted plant within a compartment in the machine. We turned on the mechanism and when we opened the door after a few minutes the plant was gone. The pot and earth within it was intact, but the plant had vanished. A search of the pot revealed that not even a bit of root remained.

Where had the plant gone? Why did the pot and earth remain?

Scott declared the plant had been shunted into an outre dimension, lying between the lines of stress created in the time pattern by the

action of the machine. He concluded that the newly discovered force acted more swiftly upon a life organism than upon an inanimate object.

We replaced the pot within the compartment, but after twenty-four hours it was still there. We were forced to conclude the force had no effect upon inanimate objects.

We found later that here we touched close to the truth, but had failed to grasp it in its entirety.

THE DREAM

A year following the construction of the time-power machine, Scott came into an inheritance when a relative, whom he had almost forgotten but who apparently had not forgotten him, died. The inheritance was modest, but to Scott and me, who had lived from hand to mouth for years, it appeared large.

Scott resigned his position as instructor and insisted upon my doing the same in order that we might devote our uninterrupted time to research.

Scott immediately set about the construction of a larger machine, while I plunged with enthusiasm into certain experiments I had held in mind for some time.

It was not until then that we thought to link our endeavors.

Our research had always seemed separated by too great a chasm to allow collaboration beyond the limited mutual aid of which we were both capable and which steadily diminished as our work progressed further and further, assuming greater and greater complications, demanding more and more specialization.

The idea occurred to me following repetition of a particularly vivid dream. In the dream I stood in a colossal laboratory, an unearthly laboratory, which seemed to stretch away on every hand for inconceivable distances. It was equipped with strange and unfamiliar apparatus and uncanny machines. On the first night the laboratory seemed unreal and filled with an unnatural mist, but on each subsequent occasion it became more and more real, until upon

awakening I could reconstruct many of its details with surprising clarity. I even made a sketch of some of the apparatus for Scott and he agreed that I must have drawn it from the memory of my dream. No man could have imagined unaided the sketches I spread upon paper for my friend.

Scott expressed an opinion that my research into hypnology had served to train my 'consciousness units' to a point where they had become more specialized and were capable of retaining a more accurate memory of their wandering. I formulated a theory that my consciousness units had actually increased in number, which would account in a measure for the vividness of the dream.

'I wonder,' I mused, 'if your time-power would have any influence upon the units.'

Scott hummed under his breath. 'I wonder,' he said.

The dream occurred at regular intervals. Had it not been for my absorption in my work, the dream might have become irksome, but I was elated, for I had found in myself a subject for investigation.

One night Scott brought forth a mechanism resembling the headphones of early radio sets, on which he had been working for weeks. He had not yet explained its purpose.

Pete,' he said, 'I want you to move your cot near the table and put on this helmet. When you go to sleep I'll plug it in the time-power. If it has any effect upon consciousness units, this will demonstrate it.'

He noticed my hesitation.

'Don't be afraid,' he urged. 'I will watch beside you. If anything goes wrong, I'll jerk the plug and wake you.'

So I put on the helmet and, with Scott Marston sitting in a chair beside my cot, went to sleep.

That night I seemed to actually walk in the laboratory. I saw no one, but I examined the place from end to end. I distinctly remember handling strange tools, the use of which I could only vaguely speculate upon. Flanking the main laboratory were many archways, opening into smaller rooms, which I did not investigate. The architecture of the

laboratory and the archways was unbelievably alien, a fact I had noticed before but had never examined in such minute detail.

I opened my eyes and saw the anxious face of Scott Marston above me.

'What happened, Pete?' he asked.

I grasped his arm.

'Scott, I was there. I actually walked in the laboratory. I picked up tools. I can see the place now, plainer than ever before.'

I saw a wild light come into his eyes. He rose from the chair and stood towering above me as I propped myself up on my arms.

'Do you know what we've found, Pete! Do you realize that we can travel in time, that we can explore the future, investigate the past? We are not even bound to this sphere, this plane of existence. We can travel into the multi dimensions. We can go back to the first flush of eternity and see the cosmos born out of the womb of nothingness! We can travel forward to the day when all that exists comes to an end in the ultimate dispersion of wasted energy, when even space may be wiped out of existence and nothing but frozen time remains!'

'Are you mad, Scott?'

His eyes gleamed.

'Mot mad, Pete. Victorious! We can build a machine large enough, powerful enough, to turn every cell of our bodies into consciousness units. We can travel in body as well as in thought. We can live thousands of lifetimes, review billions of years. We can visit undreamed-of planets, unknown ages. We hold time in our hands!'

He beat his clenched fists together.

'That plant we placed in the machine. My God, Pete, do you know what happened to it? What primordial memories did that plant hold? Where is it now? Is it in some swamp of the carboniferous age? Has it returned to its ancestral era?'

Years passed, but we scarcely noticed their passing.

Our hair grayed slightly at the temples and the mantle of youth dropped slowly from us. No fame came to us, for our research had

progressed to a point where it would have strained even the most credulous mind to believe what we could have unfolded.

Scott built his larger time-power machine, experimented with it, devised new improvements, discovered new details . . . and rebuilt it, not once, but many times. The ultimate machine, squatting like an alien god in our workshop, bore little resemblance to the original model.

On my part, I delved more deeply into my study of dreams, relentlessly pursuing my theory of consciousness units. My progress necessarily was slower than that of my friend as I was dealing almost entirely with the abstruse although I tried to make it as practical as possible, while Scott had a more practical and material basis for his investigations.

Of course, we soon decided to make the attempt to actually transfer our bodies into the laboratory of my dreams. That is, we proposed to transform all the electrons, all the elements of our bodies, into consciousness units through the use of the time-power. A more daring scheme possibly had never been conceived by man.

In an attempt to impress upon my friend's mind a picture of the laboratory, I drew diagrams and pictures, visiting the laboratory many times, with the aid of the time-power, to gather more detailed data on the place.

It was not until I used hypnotism that I could finally transfer to Scott's mind a true picture of that massive room with its outre scientific equipment.

It was a day of high triumph when Scott, placed under the influence of the time-power, awoke to tell me of the place I had visited so often. It was not until then that we could be absolutely sure we had accomplished the first, and perhaps most difficult, step in our great experiment.

I plunged into a mad study of the psychology of the Oriental ascetic, who of all people was the furthest advanced in the matter of concentration, the science of willpower, and the ability to subjugate

the body to the mind.

Although my studies left much to be desired, they nevertheless pointed the way for us to consciously aid the time-power element in reducing our corporeal beings to the state of consciousness units necessary for our actual transportation to the huge laboratory with which we had both grown so familiar.

There were other places than the dream-laboratory, of course. Both of us, in our half-life imparted by the time-power, visited other strange places, the location of which in time and space we could not determine. We looked upon sights which would have blasted our mortal sanity had we gazed upon them in full consciousness. There were times when we awoke with blanched faces and told each other in ghastly, fear-ridden whispers of the horrors that dwelled in some unprobed dimension of the unplumbed depth of the cosmos. We stared at shambling, slithering things which we recognized as the descendants of entities, or perhaps the very entities, which were related in manuscripts written by ancient men versed in the blackest of sorcery - and still remembered in the hag-ridden tales of people in the hinterlands.

But it was upon the mysterious laboratory that we centered all our efforts. It had been our first real glimpse into the vast vista to which we had raised the veil and to it we remained true, regarding those other places as mere side excursions into the recondite world we had discovered.

IN THE CREATOR'S LABORATORY

At last the day arrived when we were satisfied we had advanced sufficiently far in our investigations and had perfected our technique to a point where we might safely attempt an actual excursion into the familiar, yet unknown, realm of the dream-laboratory.

The completed and improved time-power machine squatted before us like a hideous relic out of the forgotten days of an earlier age, its weird voice filling the entire house, rising and falling, half the time a scream, half the time a deep murmur. Its polished sides glistened

evilly and the mirrors set about it, at inconceivable angles in their relation to each other, caught the glare from the row of step-up tubes across the top, reflecting the light to bathe the entire creation in an unholy glow.

We stood before it, our hair tinged with gray, our faces marked by lines of premature age. We were young men grown old in the service of our ambition and vast curiosity.

After ten years we had created a thing that I now realize might have killed us both. But at that time we were superbly confident. Ten years of molding metal and glass, harnessing and taming strange powers! Ten years of molding brains, of concentrating and stepping up the sensitivity and strength of our consciousness until, day and night, there lurked in the back of our brains an image of that mysterious laboratory. As our consciousness direction had been gradually narrowed, the laboratory had become almost a second life to us.

Scott pressed a stud on the side of the machine and a door swung outward, revealing an interior compartment which yawned like a black maw. In that maw was no hint of the raw power and surging strength revealed by the exterior. Yet, to the uninitiate, it would have held a horrible threat of its own.

Scott stepped through the door into the pitch-black interior; gently he lowered himself into the reclining seat, reaching out to place his hands on the power controls.

I slid in beside him and closed the door. As the last ray of light was shut out, absolute blackness enveloped us. We fitted power helmets on our heads. Terrific energy poured through us, beating through our bodies, seeming to tear us to pieces.

My friend stretched forth a groping hand. Fumbling in the darkness, I found it. Our hands closed in a fierce grip, the handshake of men about to venture into the unknown.

I fought for control of my thoughts, centered them savagely upon the laboratory, recalling, with a supereffort, every detail of its interior. Then Scott must have shoved the power control full over. My body was

pain-racked, then seemed to sway with giddiness. I forgot my body. The laboratory seemed nearer; it seemed to flash up at me. I was falling toward it, falling rapidly. I was a detached thought speeding along a directional line, falling straight into the laboratory . . . and I was very ill.

My fall was suddenly broken, without jar or impact.

I was standing in the laboratory. I could feel the cold of the floor beneath my feet.

I glanced sidewise and there stood Scott Marston and my friend was stark naked. Of course, we would be naked. Our clothing would not be transported through the time-power machine.

'It didn't kill us,' remarked Scott.

'Not even a scratch,' I asserted.

We faced each other and shook hands, solemnly, for again we had triumphed and that handshake was a self-imposed congratulation.

We turned back to the room before us. It was a colorful place. Varicolored liquids reposed in gleaming containers. The furniture, queerly carved and constructed along lines alien to any earthly standard, seemed to be of highly polished, iridescent wood. Through the windows poured a brilliant blue daylight. Great globes suspended from the ceiling further illuminated the building with a soft white glow.

A cone of light, a creamy white faintly tinged with pink, floated through an arched doorway and entered the room. We stared at it. It seemed to be light, yet was it light? It was not transparent and although it gave one the impression of intense brilliance, its color was so soft that it did not hurt one's eyes to look at it.

The cone, about ten feet in height, rested on its smaller end and advanced rapidly toward us. Its approach was silent. There was not even the remotest suggestion of sound in the entire room. It came to a rest a short distance in front of us and I had an uncanny sense that the thing was busily observing us.

'Who are you?'

The Voice seemed to fill the room, yet there was no one there but

Scott and me, and neither of us had spoken. We looked at one another in astonishment and then shifted our gaze to the cone of light, motionless, resting quietly before us.

'I am speaking,' said the Voice and instantly each of us knew that the strange cone before us had voiced the words.

'I am not speaking,' went on the Voice. That was a misstatement. I am thinking. You hear my thoughts. I can as easily hear yours.'

Telepathy,' I suggested.

'Your term is a strange one,' replied the Voice, 'but the mental image the term calls up tells me that you faintly understand the principle.

T perceive from your thoughts that you are from a place which you call the Earth. I know where the Earth is located. I understand you are puzzled and discomfited by my appearance, my powers, and my general disresemblance to anything you have ever encountered. Do not be alarmed. I welcome you here. I understand you worked hard and well to arrive here and no harm will befall you.'

'I am Scott Marston,' said my friend, 'and this man is Peter Sands.'

The thoughts of the light-cone reached out to envelop us and there was a faint tinge of rebuke, a timbre of pity at what must have appeared to the thing as unwarranted egotism on our part.

'In this place there are no names. We are known by our personalities. However, as your mentality demands an identifying name, you may think of me as the Creator.

'And now, there are others I would have you see.'

He sounded a call, a weird call which seemed to incorporate as equally a weird name.

There was a patter of feet on the floor and from an adjoining room ran three animallike figures. Two were similar. They were pudgy of body, with thick, short legs which terminated in rounded pads that made sucking sounds as they ran. They had no arms, but from the center of their bulging chests sprang a tentacle, fashioned somewhat after the manner of an elephant's trunk, but with a number of small

tentacles at its end. Their heads, rising to a peak from which grew a plume of gaily colored feathers, sat upon their tapering shoulders without benefit of necks.

The third was an antithesis of the first two. He was tall and spindly, built on the lines of a walking stick insect. His gangling legs were three-jointed. His grotesquely long arms dangled almost to the floor. Looking at his body, I believed I could have encircled it with my two hands. His head was simply an oval ball set on top of the sticklike body. The creature more nearly resembled a man than the other two, but he was a caricature of a man, a comic offering from the pen of a sardonic cartoonist.

The Creator seemed to be addressing the three.

'Here,' he said, 'are some new arrivals. They came here, I gather, in much the same manner you did. They are great scientists, great as yourselves. You will be friends.'

The Creator turned his attention to us.

'These beings which you see came here as you did and are my guests as you are my guests. They may appear outlandish to you. Rest assured that you appear just as queer to them.

They are brothers of yours, neighbors of yours. They are from your - .'

I received the impression of gazing down on vast space, filled with swirling motes of light.

'He means our solar system,' suggested Scott.

Carefully I built up in my mind a diagram of the solar system.

Wo!' The denial crashed like an angry thunderbolt upon us. Again the image of unimaginable space and of thousands of points of light - of swirling nebulae, of solar systems, mighty double suns and island universes.

'He means the universe,' said Scott.

'Certainly they came from our universe,' I replied. 'The universe is everything, isn't it - all existing things?'

Again the negative of the Creator burned its way into our brains.

'You are mistaken, Earthman. Your knowledge here counts as nothing. You are mere infants. But come; I will show you what your universe consists of.'

OUR UNIVERSE?

Streamers of light writhed down from the cone toward us. As we shrank back they coiled about our waists and gently lifted us. Soothing thoughts flowed over us, instructions to commit ourselves unreservedly to the care of the Creator, to fear no harm. Under this reassurance, my fears quieted. I felt that I was under the protection of a benevolent being, that his great power and compassion would shield me in this strange world. A Creator, in very truth!

The Creator glided across the floor to set us on our feet on the top of a huge table, which stood about seven feet above the floor level.

On the tabletop, directly before me, I saw a thin oval receptacle, made of a substance resembling glass. It was about a foot across its greatest length and perhaps a little more than half as wide and about four inches deep. The receptacle was filled with a sort of grayish substance, a mass of puttylike material. To me it suggested nothing more than a mass of brain substance.

'There,' said the Creator, pointing a light-streamer finger at the disgusting mass, 'is your universe.'

'What!' cried Scott.

'It is so,' ponderously declared the Creator.

'Such a thing is impossible,' firmly asserted Scott. 'The universe is boundless. At one time it was believed that it was finite, that it was enclosed by the curvature of space. I am convinced, however, through my study of time, that the universe, composed of millions of overlapping and interlocking dimensions, can be nothing but eternal and infinite. I do not mean that there will not be a time when all matter will be destroyed, but I do maintain - '

'You are disrespectful and conceited,' boomed the thought vibrations of the Creator. That is your universe. I made it. I created it. And more. I created the life that teems within it. I was curious to learn

what form that life would take, so I sent powerful thought vibrations into it, calling that life out. I had little hope that it had developed the necessary intelligence to find the road to my laboratory, but I find that at least five of the beings evolving from my created life possessed brains tuned finely enough to catch my vibrations and possessed sufficient intelligence to break out of their medium. You are two of these five. The other three you have just seen.'

'You mean,' said Scott, speaking softly, 'that you created matter and then went further and created life?'

'I did.'

I stared at the puttylike mass. The universe! Millions of galaxies composed of millions of suns and planets - all in that lump of matter!

This is the greatest hoax I've ever seen,' declared Scott, a deliberate note of scorn in his voice. 'If that is the universe down there, how are we so big? I could step on that dish and break the universe all to smithereens. It doesn't fit.'

The light-finger of the Creator flicked out and seized my friend, wafting him high above the table. The Creator glowed with dull flashes of red and purple.

His thought vibrations filled the room to bursting with their power.

'Presumptuous one! You defy the Creator. You call his great work a lie! You, with your little knowledge! You, a specimen of the artificial life I created, would tell me, your very Creator, that I am wrong!'

I stood frozen, staring at my friend, suspended above me at the end of the rigid light-streamer. I could see Scott's face. It was set and white, but there was no sign of fear upon it.

His voice came down to me, cold and mocking.

'A jealous god,' he taunted.

The Creator set him down gently beside me. His thoughts came to us evenly, with no trace of his terrible anger of only a moment before.

'I am not jealous. I am above all your imperfect emotions. I have evolved to the highest type of life but one - pure thought. In time I will achieve that. I may grow impatient at times with your tiny brains, with

your imperfect knowledge, with your egotism, but beyond that I am unemotional. The emotions have become unnecessary to my existence.'

I hurried to intervene.

'My friend spoke without thinking,' I explained. 'You realize this is all unusual to us. Something beyond any previous experience. It is hard for us to believe.'

'I know it must be hard for you to understand,' agreed the Creator. 'You are in an ultra-universe. The electrons and protons making up your body have grown to billions and billions of times their former size, with correspondingly greater distances between them. It is all a matter of relativity. I did not consciously create your universe, I merely created electrons and protons. I created matter. I created life - and injected it into the matter.

'I learned from the three who preceded you here that all things upon my electrons and protons, even my very created electrons and protons, are themselves composed of electrons and protons. This I had not suspected. I am at a loss to explain it. I am beginning to believe that one will never find an end to the mysteries of matter and life. It may be that the electrons and protons you know are composed of billions of infinitely smaller electrons and protons.'

'And I suppose,' mocked Scott, 'that you, the Creator, may be merely a bit of synthetic life living in a universe that is in turn merely a mass of matter in some greater laboratory.'

'It may be so,' said the Creator. 'My knowledge has made me very humble.'

Scott laughed.

'And now,' said the Creator, 'if you will tell me what food and other necessities you require to sustain life, I will see you are provided for. You also will wish to build the machine which will take you back to Earth once more. You shall be assigned living quarters and may do as you wish. When your machine is completed, you may return to Earth. If you do not wish to do so, you are welcome to remain

indefinitely as my guests. All I wished you to come here for was to satisfy my curiosity concerning what forms my artificial life may have taken.'

The tentacles of light lifted us carefully to the floor and we followed the Creator to our room, which adjoined the laboratory proper and was connected to it by a high, wide archway. What the place lacked in privacy, it made up in beauty. Finished in pastel shades, it was easy on the eyes and soothing to one's nerves.

We formed mind pictures of beds, tables, and chairs. We described our foods and their chemical composition. Water we did not need to describe. The Creator knew instantly what it was. It, of all the necessities of our life, however, seemed the only thing in common with our earth contained in this ultra-universe into which we had projected ourselves.

In what seemed to us a miraculously short time our needs were provided. We were supplied with furniture, food and clothing, all of which apparently was produced synthetically by the Creator in his laboratory.

Later we were to learn that the combining of elements and the shaping of the finished product was a routine matter. A huge, yet simple machine was used in the combination and fixing of the elements.

Steel, glass, and tools, shaped according to specifications given the Creator by Scott, were delivered to us in a large workroom directly off the laboratory where our three compatriots of the universe were at work upon their machines.

The machine being constructed by the lone gangling creature, which Scott and I had immediately dubbed the 'walking-stick-man,' resembled in structure the creature building it. It was shaped like a pyramid and into its assembly had gone hundreds of long rods.

The machine of the elephant-men was a prosaic affair, shaped like a crude box of some rubber material, but its inner machinery, which we found to be entirely alien to any earthly conceptions, was intricate.

From the first the walking-stick-man disregarded us except when we forced our attentions on him.

The elephant-men were friendly, however.

We had hardly been introduced into the workshop before the two of them attempted to strike up an acquaintaince with us.

We spoke to them as they stood before us, but they merely blinked their dull expressionless eyes. They touched us with their trunks, and we felt faint electric shocks which varied in intensity, like the impulses traveling along a wire, like some secret code tapped out by a telegrapher.

'They have no auditory sense,' said Scott. 'They talk by the transmission of electrical impulses through their trunks. There's no use talking to them.'

'And in a thousand years we might figure out their electrical language,' I replied.

After a few more futile attempts to establish communication Scott turned to the task of constructing the time-power machine, while the elephant-men padded back to their own work.

I walked over to the walking-stick-man and attempted to establish communication with him, but with no better results. The creature, seeming to resent my interruption of his work, waved his hands in fantastic gestures, working his mouth rapidly. In despair, I realized that he was talking to me, but that his jabbering was pitched too high for my ear to catch Here were representatives of three difference races, all three of a high degree of intelligence else they never would have reached this superplane, and not a single thought, not one idea could they interchange. Even had a communication of ideas been possible, I wondered if we could have found any common ground of understanding.

I stared at the machines. They were utterly different from each other and neither bore any resemblance to ours. Undoubtedly they all operated on dissimilar principles.

In that one room adjoining the main laboratory were being

constructed three essentially different types of mechanisms by three entirely different types of beings. Yet each machine was designed to accomplish the same result and each of the beings was striving for the same goal!

Unable to assist Scott in his building of the time-power machine, I spent the greater part of my waking hours in roaming about the laboratory, in watching the Creator at work. Occasionally I talked to him. At times he explained to me what he was doing, but I am afraid I understood little of what he told me.

One day he allowed me to look through a microscope at a part of the matter he had told us contained our universe.

I was unprepared for what I saw. As I peered into the complicated machine, I saw protons, electrons! Judged by earthly standards, they were grouped peculiarly, but their formation corresponded almost exactly to our planetary system. I sensed that certain properties in that master-microscope created an optical illusion by grouping them more closely than were their actual corresponding distances. The distance between them had been foreshortened to allow an entire group to be within a field of vision.

But this was impossible! The very lenses through which I was looking were themselves formed of electrons and protons! How could they have any magnifying power?

The Creator read my thoughts and tried to explain, but explanation was merely a blur of distances, a mass of tlandish mathematical equations and a pyramiding of °tupendous formulas dealing with the properties of light. I alized that, with the Creator, the Einstein equations were flementary, that the most intricate mathematics conceived by man were as rudimentary to him as simple addition.

He must have realized it, too, for after that he did not attempt to explain anything to me. He made it plain, however, that I was welcome to visit him at his work, and as time passed, he came to take my presence as a matter of course. At times he seemed to forget I was about.

The work on the time-power machine was progressing steadily under Scott's skillful hands. I could see that the other two machines were nearing completion, but that my friend was working with greater speed. I calculated that all three of the machines would be completed at practically the same time.

T don't like this place,' Scott confided to me. T want to get the machine built and get out of here as soon as I can. The Creator is a being entirely different from us. His thought processes and emotional reflexes can bear little resemblance to ours. He is further advanced along the scale of life than we. I am not fool enough to believe he accepts us as his equals. He claims he created us. Whether he did or not, and I can't bring myself to believe that he did, he nevertheless believes he did. That makes us his property - in his own belief, at least - to do with as he wishes. I'm getting out of here before something happens.'

One of the elephant-men, who had been working with his partner, approached us as we talked. He tapped me gently with his trunk and then stood stupidly staring at us.

'Funny,' said Scott. That fellow has been bothering me all day. He's got something he wants to tell us, but he doesn't seem to be able to get it across.'

Patiently I attempted an elementary language, but the elephant-man merely stared, unmoved, apparently not understanding.

The following day I secured from the Creator a supply of synthetic paper and a sort of black crayon. With these I approached the elephant-men and drew simple pictures, but again I failed. The strange creatures merely stared. Pictures and diagrams meant nothing to them.

The walking-stick-man, however, watched us from across the room and after the elephant-men had turned away to their work, he walked over to where I stood and held out his hands for the tablet and crayon. I gave them to him. He studied my sketches for a moment, ripped off the sheet and rapidly wielded the crayon. He handed back the tablet.

On the sheet were a number of hieroglyphics. I could not make head or tail of them. For a long time the two of us labored over the tablet. We covered the floor with sheets covered with our scribbling pictures, and diagrams. We quit in despair after advancing no further than recognizing the symbols for the cardinal numbers.

It was apparent that not only the elephant-men but the walking-stick-man as well wished to communicate something to us. Scott and I discussed it often, racking our brains for some means to establish communication with our brothers in exile.

CREATION - AND DESTRUCTION

It was shortly after this I made the discovery that I was able to read the unprojected thoughts of the Creator. I imagine that this was made possible by the fact that our host paid little attention to me as he went about his work. Busy with his tasks, his thoughts must have seeped out as he mulled over the problems confronting him. It must have been through this thought seepage that I caught the first of his unprojected brain-images.

At first I received just faint impressions, sort of half-thoughts. Realizing what was occurring, I concentrated upon his thoughts, endeavoring to bore into his brain, to probe out those other thoughts which lay beneath the surface. If it had not been for the intensive mind training which I had imposed upon myself prior to the attempt to project my body through the time-power machine, I am certain I would have failed. Without this training, I doubt if I would have been able to read his thoughts unbidden in the first place - certainly I could not have prevented him from learning that I had.

Recalling Scott's suspicions, I realized that my suddenly discovered ability might be used to our advantage. I also realized that this ability would be worthless should the Creator learn of it. In such case, he would be alert and would close his thought processes to me. My hope lay in keeping any suspicion disarmed. Therefore I must not only read his mind but must also keep a portion of mine closed to him.

Patch by patch I pieced his thoughts together like a jigsaw puzzle.

He was studying the destruction of matter, seeking a method of completely annihilating it. Having discovered a means of creating matter, he was now experimenting with its destruction.

I did not share my secret with Scott, for I feared that he would unconsciously betray it to the Creator.

As days passed, I learned that the Creator was considering the destruction of matter without the use of heat. I knew that, even on Earth, it was generally conceded a temperature of 4 trillion degrees Fahrenheit would absolutely annihilate matter. I had believed the Creator had found some manner in which he could control such an excessive temperature. But to attempt to destroy matter without using heat at all -! I believe that it was not until then that I fully realized the great chasm of intelligence that lay between myself and this creature of light.

I have no idea how long we remained in the world of the Creator before Scott announced that the machine in which we expected to return to our universe was ready for a few tests. Time had the illusive quality in this queer place of slithering along without noticeably passing. Although I did not think of it at the time, I cannot recollect now that the Creator employed any means of measuring time. Perhaps time, so far as he was concerned, had become an unnecessary equation. Perhaps he was eternal and time held no significance for him in his eternity.

The elephant-men and the walking-stick-man had already completed their machines, but they seemed to be waiting for us. Was it a gesture of respect? We did not know at the time.

While Scott made the final tests of our machine I walked into the laboratory. The Creator was at work at his accustomed place. Since our arrival he had paid little attention to us. Now that we were about to leave he made no expression of regret, no sign of farewell.

I approached him, wondering if I should bid him farewell. I had grown to respect him. I wanted to say goodbye, and yet . . .

Then I caught the faintest of his thoughts and I stiffened. Instantly

and unconsciously my mind thrust out probing fingers and grasped the predominant idea in the Creator's mind.

'. . . Destroy the mass of created matter - the universe which I created . . . create matter . . . destroy it. It is a laboratory product. Test my destructive . . .'

'Why, you damn murderer,' I screamed, and threw myself at him.

Light fingers flicked out at me, whipped around my body, snapped me into the air and heaved me across the laboratory. I struck on the smooth floor and skidded across it to bring up with a crash against the wall.

I shook my head to clear it and struggled to my feet. We must fight the Creator! Must save our world from destruction by the very creature who had created it!

I came to my feet with my muscles bunched, crouched in a fighting posture.

But the Creator had not moved. He stood in the same position and a rod of purple light extended between him and the queer machine of the walking-stick man. The rod of light seemed to be holding him there, frozen, immovable. Beside the machine stood the walking-stick-man, his hand on the lever, a mad glare in his eyes.

Scott was slapping the gangling fellow on his slender back.

'You've got the goods, old man,' he was shouting. 'That's one trick old frozen face didn't learn from you.'

A thunderous tumult beat through my head. The machine of the walking-stick-man was not a transmission machine at all. It was a weapon - a weapon that could freeze the Creator into rigid lines.

Weird colors flowed through the Creator. Dead silences lay over the room. The machine of the walking-stick-man was silent, with no noise to hint of the great power it must have been developing. The purple rod did not waver. It was just a rigid rod of purple which had struck and stiffened the Creator.

I screamed at Scott: 'Quick! The universe! He is going to destroy it!'

Scott leaped forward. Together we raced toward the table where

the mass of created matter lay in its receptacle. Behind us padded the elephant-men.

As we reached the table, I felt a sinuous trunk wrap about me. With a flip I was hurled to the tabletop. It was but a step to the dish containing the universe. I snatched it up, dish and all, and handed it down to Scott. I let myself over the table edge, hung by my hands for an instant, and dropped. I raced after the others toward the workshop.

As we gained the room, the walking-stick-man made an adjustment on his machine. The purple rod faded away. The Creator, a towering cone of light, tottered for a moment and then glided swiftly for the doorway.

Instantly a sheet of purple radiance filled the opening. The Creator struck against it and was hurled back.

The radiance was swiftly arching overhead and curving beneath us, cutting through the floor, walls, and ceiling.

'He's enclosing us in a globe of that stuff,' cried Scott. 'It must be an energy screen of some sort, but I can't imagine what. Can you?'

'I don't care what it is, just so it works,' I panted, anxiously.

Through the steady purple light I could see the Creator. Repeatedly he hurled himself against the screen and each time he was hurled back.

'We're moving,' announced Scott.

The great purple globe was ascending, carrying in its interior we five universe-men, our machines, and fragments of the room in which we but recently had stood. It was cutting through the building like the flame of a torch through soft steel. We burst free of the building into the brilliant blue sunlight of that weird world.

Beneath us lay the building, a marvel of outre architecture, but with a huge circular shaft cut through it - the path of the purple globe. All about the building lay a forest of red and yellow vegetation, shaped as no vegetation of Earth is shaped, bent into hundreds of strange and alien forms.

Swiftly the globe sprang upward to hang in the air some distance

above the building. As far as the eye could see stretched the painted forest. The laboratory we had just quit was the only sign of habitation. No roads, no lakes, no rivers, no distant mountain - nothing relieved the level plain of red and yellow stretching away to faint horizons.

Was the Creator, I wondered, the sole denizen of this land? Was he the last survivor of a mystic race? Had there ever been a race at all? Might not the Creator be a laboratory product, even as the things he created were laboratory products? But if so, who or what had set to work the agents which resulted in that uncanny cone of energy?

My reflections were cut short as the walking-stick-man reached out his skinny hand for the mass of matter which Scott still held. As I watched him breathlessly, he laid it gently on a part of the floor which still remained in the globe and pulled a sliding rod from the side of the machine. A faint purple radiance sprang from the point of the rod, bathing the universe. The radiant purple surrounded the mass, grew thicker and thicker, seeming to congeal into layer after layer until the mass of matter lay sealed in a thick shell of the queer stuff. When I touched it, it did not appear to be hard or brittle. It was smooth and slimy to the touch, but I could not dent it with my fingers.

'He's building up the shell of the globe in just the same way,' Scott said. The machine seems to be projecting that purple stuff to the outside of the shell, where it is congealed into layers.'

I noted that what he said was true. The shell of the globe had taken on a thickness that could be perceived, although the increased thickness did not seem to interfere with our vision.

Looking down at the laboratory, I could see some strange mechanism mounted on the roof of the building. Beside the massive mechanism stood the Creator.

'Maybe it's a weapon of some sort,' suggested Scott.

Hardly had he spoken when a huge column of crimson light leaped forth from the machine. I threw up my hands to protect my eyes from the glare of the fiery column. For an instant the globe was bathed in the red glow, then a huge globule of red collected on its surface and

leaped away, straight for the laboratory, leaving behind a trail of crimson.

The globe trembled at the force of the explosion as the ball of light struck. Where the laboratory had stood was merely a great hole, blasted to the primal rock beneath. The vegetation for great distances on either side was sifting ash. The Creator had disappeared. The colorful world beneath stretched empty to the horizon. The men of the universe had proven to be stronger than their Creator!

'If there's any more Creators around these parts,' said Scott, smiling feebly, 'they won't dare train another gun on this thing in the next million years. It gives them exactly what was meant for the other fellow; it crams their poison right down their own throats. Pete, that mass of matter, whether or not it is the universe, is saved. All hell couldn't get at it here.'

The walking-stick-man, his mummylike face impassive as ever, locked the controls of the machine. It was, I saw, still operating, was still building up the shell of the globe. Second by second the globe was adding to its fortress - light strength. My mind reeled as I thought of it continuing thus throughout eternity.

The elephant-men were climbing into their machines.

Scott smiled wanly.

'The play is over,' he said. 'The curtain is down. It's time for us to go.'

He stepped to the side of the walking-stick man.

'I wish you would use our machine.' he said, evidently forgetting our friend could understand no word he spoke. 'You threw away your chance back there when you built this contraption instead of a transmitter. Our machine will take you wherever you wish to go.'

He pointed to the machine and to the universe, then tapped his head. With the strange being at his side, he walked to our machine, pointed out the controls, explained its uses in pantomime.

'I don't know if he understands,' said Scott, 'but I did the best I could.'

As I walked past the walking-stick-man to step into the time-power machine, I believe I detected a faint flicker of a smile on his face. Of that, however, I can never be sure.

MAROONED IN TIME

I know how the mistake was made. I was excited when I stepped into the machine. My mind was filled with the many strange happenings I had witnessed. I thought along space directional lines, but I forgot to reckon the factor of time.

I thought of the Earth, but I did not consider time. I willed myself to be back on Earth, but I forgot to will myself in any particular time era. Consequently when Scott shoved over the lever, I was shot to Earth, but the time element was confused.

I realize that life in the superuniverse of the Creator, being billions of times larger than life upon the Earth, was correspondingly slower. Every second in the superuniverse was equal to years of Earth-time. My life in the Creator's universe had equalled millions of years of Terran existence.

I believe that my body was projected along a straight line and not along the curve which was necessary to place me back in the twentieth century.

This is theory, of course. There might have been some fault in the machine. The purple globe might have exerted some influence to distort our calculations.

Be that as it may, I reached a dying planet. It has been given to me, a man of the twentieth century, to live out the last years of my life on my home planet some millions of years later than the date of my birth. I, a resident of a comparatively young dynasty in the history of the Earth, now am tribal chieftain and demigod of the last race, a race that is dying even as the planet is dying.

As I sit before my cave or huddle with the rest of my clan around a feeble fire, I often wonder if Scott Marston was returned to Earth in his proper time. Or is he, too, a castaway in some strange time? Does he still live? Did he ever reach the Earth? I often feel that he may even

now be searching through the vast corridors of time and the deserts of space for me, his onetime partner in the wildest venture ever attempted by man.

And often, too, I wonder if the walking-stick-man used our time-power machine to return to his native planet. Or is he a prisoner in his own trap, caught within the scope of the great purple globe? And I wonder how large the globe has grown.

I realize now that our effort to save the universe was unnecessary so far as the Earth was concerned, for the Earth, moving at its greater time-speed, would already have plunged into extinction in the flaming furnace of the sun before the Creator could carry out his destructive plans.

But what of those other worlds? What of those other planets which must surely swim around strange suns in the gulf of space? What of the planets and races yet unborn?

What of the populations that may exist on the solar systems of island universes far removed from our own?

They are saved, saved for all time; for the purple globe will guard the handiwork of the Creator through eternity.

Shotgun Cure

The clinics were set up and in the morning they'd start on Operation Kelly - and that was something, wasn't it, that they should call it Kelly!

He sat in the battered rocking chair on the sagging porch and said it once again and rolled it on his tongue, but the taste of it was not so sharp nor sweet as it once had been, when that great London doctor had risen in the United Nations to suggest it could be called nothing else but Kelly.

Although, when one came to think of it, there was a deal of happenstance. It needn't have been Kelly. It could have been just anyone at all with an M.D. to his name. It could as well have been

Cohen or Johnson or Radzonovich or any other of them - any one of all the doctors in the world.

He rocked gently in the creaking chair while the floor boards of the porch groaned in sympathy, and in the gathering dusk were the sounds, as well, of children at the day's-end play, treasuring those last seconds before they had to go inside and soon thereafter to bed.

There was the scent of lilacs in the coolness of the air and at the corner of the garden he could faintly see the white flush of an early-blooming bridal wreath - the one that Martha Anderson had given him and Janet so many years ago, when they first had come to live in this very house.

A neighbor came tramping down the walk and he could not make him out in the deepening dusk, but the man called out to him.

'Good evening, Doc,' he said.

'Good evening, Hiram,' said old Doc Kelly, knowing who it was by the voice of him.

The neighbor went on, tramping down the walk.

Old Doc kept up his gentle rocking with his hands folded on his pudgy stomach and from inside the house he could hear the bustling in the kitchen as Janet cleared up after supper. In a little while, perhaps, she'd come out and sit with him and they'd talk together, low-voiced and casually, as befitted an old couple very much in love.

Although, by rights, he shouldn't stay out here on the porch. There was the medical journal waiting for him on the study desk and he should be reading it. There was so much new stuff these days that a man should keep up with - although, perhaps, the way things were turning out it wouldn't really matter if a man kept up or not.

Maybe in the years to come there'd be precious little a man would need to keep up with.

Of course, there'd always be need of doctors. There'd always be damn fools smashing up their cars and shooting one another and getting fishhooks in their hands and falling out of trees. And there'd always be the babies.

He rocked gently to and fro and thought of all the babies and how some of them had grown until they were men and women now and had babies of their own. And he thought of Martha Anderson, Janet's closest friend, and he thought of old Con Gilbert, as ornery an old shikepoke as ever walked the earth, and tight with money, too. He chuckled a bit wryly, thinking of all the money Con Gilbert finally owed him, never having paid a bill in his entire life.

But that was the way it went. There were some who paid and others who made no pretense of paying, and that was why he and Janet lived in this old house and he drove a five-year car and Janet had worn the selfsame dress to church the blessed winter long.

Although it made no difference, really, once one considered it. For the important pay was not in cash.

There were those who paid and those who didn't pay. And there were those who lived and the other ones who died, no matter what you did. There was hope for some and the ones who had no hope - and some of these you told and there were others that you didn't.

But it was different now.

And it all had started right here in this little town of Millville - not much more than a year ago.

Sitting in the dark, with the lilac scent and the white blush of the bridal wreath and the muted sounds of children clasping to themselves the last minutes of their play, he remembered it.

It was almost 8:30 and he could hear Martha Anderson in the outer office talking to Miss Lane and she, he knew, had been the last of them.

He took off his white jacket, folding it absent-mindedly, fogged with weariness, and laid it across the examination table.

Janet would be waiting supper, but she'd never say a word, for she never had. All these many years she had never said a word of reproach to him, although there had been at times a sense of disapproval at his easy-going ways, at his keeping on with patients who didn't even thank him, much less pay their bills. And a sense of

disapproval, too, at the hours he kept, at his willingness to go out of nights when he could just as well have let a call go till his regular morning rounds.

She would be waiting supper and she would know that Martha had been in to see him and she'd ask him how she was, and what was he to tell her?

He heard Martha going out and the sharp click of Miss Lane's heels across the outer office. He moved slowly to the basin and turned on the tap, picking up the soap.

He heard the door creak open and did not turn his head. 'Doctor,' said Miss Lane, 'Martha thinks she's fine. She says you're helping her. Do you think...'

'What would you do,' he asked.

'I don't know,' she said.

Would you operate, knowing it was hopeless? Would you send her to a specialist, knowing that he couldn't help her, knowing she can't pay him and that she'll worry about not paying? Would you tell her that she has, perhaps, six months to live and take from her the little happiness and hope she still has left to her?'

'I am sorry, doctor.'

'No need to be. I've faced it many times. No case is the same. Each one calls for a decision of its own. It's been a long, hard day...'

'Doctor, there's another one out there.'

'Another patient?'

'A man. He just came in. His name is Harry Herman.'

'Herman? I don't know any Hermans.'

'He's a stranger,' said Miss Lane. 'Maybe he just moved into town.'

'If he'd moved in,' said Doc, 'I'd have heard of it. I hear everything.'

'Maybe he's just passing through. Maybe he got sick driving on the road.'

'Well, send him in,' said Doc, reaching for a towel. 'I'll have a look at him.'

The nurse turned to the door.

'And Miss Lane.'

'Yes?'

'You may as well go home. There's no use sticking round. It's been a real bad day.'

And it had been, at that, he thought. A fracture, a burn, a cut, a dropsy, a menopause, a pregnancy, two pelvics, a scattering of colds, a feeding schedule, two teethings, a suspicious lung, a possible gallstone, a cirrhosis of the liver and Martha Anderson. And now, last of all, this man named Harry Herman - no name that he knew and when one came to think of it, a rather funny name.

And he was a funny man. Just a bit too tall and willowy to be quite believable, ears too tight against his skull, lips so thin they seemed no lips at all.

'Doctor?' he asked, standing in the doorway.

'Yes,' said Doc, picking up his jacket and shrugging into it. 'Yes, I am the doctor. Come on in. What can I do for you?'

'I am not ill,' said the man.

'Not ill?'

'But I want to talk to you. You have time, perhaps?'

'Yes, certainly,' said Doc, knowing that he had no time and resenting this intrusion. 'Come on in. Sit down.'

He tried to place the accent, but was unable to. Central European, most likely.

'Technical,' said the man. 'Professional.'

'What do you mean?' asked Doc, getting slightly nettled.

'I talk to you technical. I talk professional.'

'You mean that you're a doctor?'

'Not exactly,' said the man, 'although perhaps you think so. I should tell you immediate that I am an alien.'

'An alien,' said Old Doc. 'We've got lots of them around. Mostly refugees.'

'Not what I mean. Not that kind of alien. From some other planet. From some other star.'

'But you said your name was Herman...'

'When in Rome,' said the other one, 'you must do as Romans.'

'Huh?' asked Doc, and then: 'Good God, do you mean that? That you are an alien. By an alien, do you mean...'

The other nodded happily. 'From some other planet. From some other star. Very many light-years.'

'Well, I'll be damned,' said Doc.

He stood there looking at the alien and the alien grinned back at him, but uncertainly.

'You think, perhaps,' the alien said, 'but he is so human!'

'That,' said Doc, 'was going through my mind.'

'So you would have a look, perhaps. You would know a human body.'

'Perhaps,' said Doc grimly, not liking it at all. 'But the human body can take some funny turns.'

'But not a turn like this,' said the stranger, showing him his hands.

'No,' said the shocked old Doc. 'No such turn as that.' For the hand had two thumbs and a single finger, almost as if a bird claw had decided to turn into a hand.

'Nor like this?' asked the other, standing up and letting down his trousers.

'Nor like that,' said Doc, more shaken than he'd been in many years of practice.

'Then,' said the alien, zipping up his trousers, 'I think that it is settled.'

He sat down again and calmly crossed his knees, 'If you mean I accept you as an alien,' said Doc, 'I suppose I do. Although it's not an easy thing.'

'I suppose it is not. It comes as quite a shock.'

Doc passed a hand across his brow. 'Yes, a shock, of course. But there are other points...'

'You mean the language,' said the alien. 'And my knowledge of your customs.'

'That's part of it, naturally.'

'We've studied you,' the alien said. 'We've spent some time on you. Not you alone, of course...'

'But you talk so well,' protested Doc. 'Like a well-educated foreigner.'

'And that, of course,' the other said, 'is what exactly I am.'

'Why, yes, I guess you are,' said Doc. 'I hadn't thought of it.'

'I am not glib,' said the alien. 'I know a lot of words, but I use them incorrect. And my vocabulary is restricted to just the common speech. On matters of great technicality, I will not be proficient.'

Doc walked around behind his desk and sat down rather limply.

'All right,' he said, 'let's have the rest of it. I accept you as an alien. Now tell me the other answer. Just why are you here?'

And he was surprised beyond all reason that he could approach the situation as calmly as he had. In a little while, he knew, when he had time to think it over, he would get the shakes.

'You're a doctor,' said the alien. 'You are a healer of your race.'

'Yes,' said Doc. 'I am one of many healers.'

'You work very hard to make the unwell well. You mend the broken flesh. You hold off death...'

'We try. Sometimes we don't succeed.'

'You have many ailments. You have the cancer and the heart attacks and colds and many other things - I do not find the word.'

'Diseases,' Doc supplied.

'Disease. That is it. You will pardon my shortcomings in the tongue.'

'Let's cut out the niceties,' suggested Doc. 'Let's get on with it.'

'It is not right,' the alien said, 'to have all these diseases. It is not nice. It is an awful thing.'

'We have less than we had at one time. We've licked a lot of them.'

'And, of course,' the alien said, 'you make your living with them.'

'What's that you said!' yelped Doc.

'You will be tolerant of me if I misunderstand. An economic system is a hard thing to get into one's head.'

'I know what you mean,' growled Doc, 'but let me tell you, sir...'

But what was the use of it, he thought. This being was thinking the self-same thing that many humans thought.

'I would like to point out to you,' he said, starting over once again, 'that the medical profession is working hard to conquer those diseases you are talking of. We are doing all we can to destroy our own jobs.'

'That is fine,' the alien said. 'It is what I thought, but it did not square with your planet's business sense. I take it, then, you would not be averse to seeing all disease destroyed.'

'Now, look here,' said Doc, having had enough of it, 'I don't know what you are getting at. But I am hungry and I am tired and if you want to sit here threshing out philosophies...'

'Philosophies,' said the alien. 'Oh, not philosophies. I am practical. I have come to offer an end of all disease.'

They sat in silence for a moment, then Doc stirred half protestingly and said, 'Perhaps I misunderstood you, but I thought you said...'

'I have a method, a development, a find - I do not catch the word - that will destroy all diseases.'

'A vaccine,' said Old Doc.

'That's the word. Except it is different in some ways than the vaccine you are thinking.'

'Cancer?' Doc asked.

The alien nodded. 'Cancer and the common cold and all the others of them. You name it and it's gone.'

'Heart,' said Doc. 'You can't vaccinate for heart.'

'That, too,' the alien said. 'It does not really vaccinate. It makes the body strong. It makes the body right. Like tuning up a motor and making it like new. The motor will wear out in time, but it will function until it is worn out entirely.'

Doc stared hard at the alien. 'Sir,' he said, 'this is not the sort of thing one should joke about.'

'I am not joking,' said the alien.

'And this vaccine - it will work on humans? It has no side effects?'

'I am sure it will. We have studied your - your - the way your bodies work.'

'Metabolism is the word you want.'

'Thank you.' said the alien.

'And the price?' asked Doc.

'There is no price,' the alien said. 'We are giving it to you.'

'Completely free of charge? Surely there must be...'

'Without any charge,' the alien said. 'Without any strings.'

He got up from the chair. He took a flat box from his pocket and walked over to the desk. He placed it upon the desk and pressed its side and the top sprang open. Inside of it were pads - like surgical pads, but they were not made of cloth.

Doc reached out, then halted his hand just above the box.

'May I?' he asked.

'Yes, certainly. You only touch the tops.'

Doc gingerly lifted out one of the pads and laid it on the desk. He kneaded it with a skittish finger and there was liquid in the pad. He could feel the liquid squish as he pressed the pad.

He turned it over carefully and the underside of it was rough and corrugated, as if it were a mouthful of tiny, vicious teeth.

'You apply the rough side to the body of the patient.' said the alien. 'It seizes on the patient. It becomes a part of him. The body absorbs the vaccine and the pad drops off.'

'And that is all there's to it?'

'That is all,' the alien said.

Doc lifted the pad between two cautious fingers and dropped it back into the box.

He looked up at the alien. 'But why?' he asked. 'Why are you giving this to us!'

'You do not know,' the alien said. 'You really do not know.'

'No, I don't,' said Doc.

The alien's eyes suddenly were old and weary and he said: 'In

another million years you will.'

'Not me,' said Doc.

'In another million years,' the alien said, 'you'll do the same yourself, but it will be something different. And then someone will ask you, and you won't be able to answer any more than I am now.'

If it was a rebuke, it was a very gentle one. Doc tried to decide if it were or not. He let the matter drop.

'Can you tell me what is in it?' he asked, gesturing at the pad.

'I can give you the descriptive formula, but it would be in our terms. It would be gibberish.'

'You won't be offended if I try these out?'

'I'd be disappointed if you didn't,' said the alien. 'I would not expect your faith to extend so far. It would be simple minded.'

He shut the box and pushed it closer to Old Doc. He turned and strode toward the door.

Doc rose ponderously to his feet.

'Now, wait a minute there!' he bellowed.

'I'll see you in a week or two,' the alien said.

He went out and closed the door behind him.

Doc sat down suddenly in the chair and stared at the box upon the desk.

He reached out and touched it and it was really there. He pressed the side of it, and the lid popped open and the pads were there, inside.

He tried to fight his way back to sanity, to conservative and solid ground, to a proper - and a human - viewpoint.

'It's all hogwash,' he said.

But it wasn't hogwash. He knew good and well it wasn't.

He fought it out with himself that night behind the closed door of his study, hearing faintly the soft bustling in the kitchen as Janet cleared away from supper.

And the first fight was on the front of credibility.

He had told the man he believed he was an alien and there was

evidence that he could not ignore. Yet it seemed so incredible, all of it, every bit of it, that it was hard to swallow.

And the hardest thing of all was that this alien, whoever he might be, had come, of all the doctors in the world, to Dr. Jason Kelly, a little one horse doctor in a little one horse town.

He debated whether it might be a hoax and decided that it wasn't, for the three digits on the hand and the other thing he'd seen would have been difficult to simulate. And the whole thing, as a hoax, would be so stupid and so cruel that it simply made no sense. Besides, no one hated him enough to go to all the work. And even granting a hatred of appropriate proportion, he doubted there was anyone in Millville imaginative enough to think of this.

So the only solid ground he had, he told himself, was to assume that the man had been really an alien and that the pads were _bona fide_.

And if that was true, there was only one procedure: He must test the pads.

He rose from his chair and paced up and down the floor.

Martha Anderson, he told himself. Martha Anderson had cancer and her life was forfeit - there was nothing in man's world of knowledge that had a chance to save her. Surgery was madness, for she'd probably not survive it. And even if she did, her case was too advanced. The killer that she carried had already broken loose and was swarming through her body and there was no hope for her.

Yet he could not bring himself to do it, for she was Janet's closest friend and she was old and poor and every instinct in him screamed against his using her as a guinea pig.

Now if it were only old Con Gilbert - he could do a thing like that to Con. It would be no more than the old skinflint rightly had coming to him. But old Con was too mean to be really sick; despite all the complaining that he did, he was healthy as a hog.

No matter what the alien had said about no side effects, he told himself, one could not be sure. He had said they'd studied the

metabolism of the human race and yet, on the face of it, it seemed impossible.

The answer, he knew, was right there any time he wanted it. It was tucked away back in his brain and he knew that it was there, but he pretended that it wasn't and he kept it tucked away and refused to haul it forth.

But after an hour or so of pacing up and down the room and of batting out his brains, he finally gave up and let the answer out.

He was quite calm when he rolled up his sleeve and opened up the box. And he was a matter-of-fact physician when he lifted out the pad and slapped it on his arm.

But his hand was shaking when he rolled down the sleeve so Janet wouldn't see the pad and ask a lot of questions about what had happened to his arm.

Tomorrow all over the world outside Millville, people would line up before the clinic doors, with their sleeves rolled up and ready. The lines, most likely, would move at a steady clip, for there was little to it. Each person would pass before a doctor and the doctor would slap a pad onto his or her arm and the next person would step up.

All over the world, thought Doc, in every cranny of it, in every little village; none would be overlooked. Even the poor, he thought, for there would be no charge.

And one could put his finger on a certain date and say:

'This was the day in history when disease came to an end.'

For the pads not only would kill the present ailments, but would guard against them in the future.

And every twenty years the great ships out of space would come, carrying other cargoes of the pads and there would be another Vaccination Day. But not so many then - only the younger generation. For once a person had been vaccinated, there was no further need of it. Vaccinated once and you were set for life.

Doc tapped his foot quietly on the floor of the porch to keep the rocker going. It was pleasant here, he thought. And tomorrow it would

be pleasant in the entire world. Tomorrow the fear would have been largely filtered out of human life. After tomorrow, short of accident or violence, men could look forward confidently to living out their normal lifetimes. And, more to the point, perhaps, completely healthy lifetimes.

The night was quiet, for the children finally had gone in, giving up their play. And he was tired. Finally, he thought, he could admit that he was tired. There was now, after many years, no treason in saying he was tired.

Inside the house he heard the muffled purring of the phone and the sound of it broke the rhythm of his rocking, brought him forward to the chair's edge.

Janet's feet made soft sounds as they moved toward the phone and he thrilled to the gentleness of her voice as she answered it.

Now, in just a minute, she would call him and he'd get up and go inside.

But she didn't call him. Her voice went on talking.

He settled back into the chair.

He'd forgotten once again.

The phone no longer was an enemy. It no longer haunted.

For Millville had been the first. The fear had already been lifted here. Millville had been the guinea pig, the pilot project.

Martha Anderson had been the first of them and after her Ted Carson, whose lung had been suspicious, and after him the Jurgen's baby when it came down with pneumonia. And a couple of dozen others until all the pads were gone.

And the alien had come back.

And the alien had said - what was it he had said?

'Don't think of us as benefactors nor as supermen. We are neither one. Think of me if you will, as the man across the street.'

And it had been. Doc told himself, a reaching by the alien for an understanding, an attempt to translate this thing that they were doing into a common idiom.

And had there been any understanding - any depth of understanding? Doc doubted that there had been.

Although, he recalled, the aliens had been basically very much like humans. They could even joke.

There had been one joking thing the original alien had said that had stuck inside his mind. And it had been a sort of silly thing, silly on the face of it, but it had bothered him.

The screen door banged behind Janet as she came out on the porch. She sat down in the glider.

'That was Martha Anderson,' she said.

Doc chuckled to himself. Martha lived just five doors up the street and she and Janet saw one another a dozen times a day yet Martha had to phone.

'What did Martha want?' he asked.

Janet laughed. 'She wanted help with rolls.'

'You mean her famous rolls?'

'Yes. She couldn't remember for the life of her, how much yeast she used.'

Doc chortled softly. 'And those are the ones, I suppose, she wins all the prizes on at the county fair.'

Janet said, crisply: 'It's not so funny as you make it, Jason. It's easy to forget a thing like that. She does a lot of baking.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right.' said Doc.

He should be getting in, he told himself, and start reading in the journal. And yet he didn't want to. It was so pleasant sitting here - just sitting. It had been a long time since he could do much sitting.

And it was all right with him, of course, because he was getting old and close to worn out, but it wouldn't be all right with a younger doctor, one who still owed for his education and was just starting out. There was talk in the United Nations of urging all the legislative bodies to consider medical subsidies to keep the doctors going. For there still was need of them. Even with all diseases vanished, there still was need of them. It wouldn't do to let their ranks thin out, for there would

be time and time again when they would be badly needed.

He'd been listening to the footsteps for quite a while, coming down the street, and now all at once they were turning in the gate.

He sat up straighter in his chair.

Maybe it was a patient, knowing he'd be home, coming in to see him.

'Why,' said Janet, considerably surprised, 'it is Mr. Gilbert.'

It was Con Gilbert, sure enough.

'Good evening, Doc,' said Con. 'Good evening, Miz Kelly.'

'Good evening,' Janet said, getting up to go.

'No use of you to leave,' Con said to her.

'I have some things to do,' she told him. 'I was just getting ready to go in.'

Con came up the steps and sat down on the glider.

'Nice evening,' he declared.

'It is all of that,' said Doc.

'Nicest spring I've ever seen,' said Con, working his way around to what he had to say.

'I was thinking that,' said Doc. 'It seems to me the lilacs never smelled so good before.'

'Doc,' said Con, 'I figure I owe you quite a bit of money.'

'You owe me some,' said Doc.

'You got an idea how much it might be?'

'Not the faintest,' Doc told him. 'I never bothered to keep track of it.'

'Figured it was a waste of time,' said Con. 'Figured I would never pay it.'

'Something like that,' Doc agreed.

'Been doctoring with you for a right long time,' said Con.

'That's right, Con.'

'I got three hundred here. You figure that might do it?'

'Let's put it this way. Con,' said Doc. 'I'd settle for a whole lot less.'

'I guess, then, that sort of makes us even. Seems to me three hundred might be close to fair.'

'If you say so,' said Doc.

Con dug out his billfold, extracted a wad of bills and handed them across. Doc took them and folded them and stuffed them in his pocket.

'Thank you, Con,' he said.

And suddenly he had a funny feeling, as if there were something he should know, as if there were something that he should be able to just reach out and grab.

But he couldn't, no matter how he tried, figure what it was.

Con got up and shuffled across the porch, heading for the steps.

'Be seeing you around,' he said.

Doc jerked himself back to reality.

'Sure, Con. Be seeing you around. And thanks.'

He sat in the chair, not rocking, and listened to Con going down the walk and out the gate and then down the street until there was only silence.

And if he ever was going to get at it, he'd have to go in now and start reading in the journal.

Although, more than likely, it was all damn foolishness. He'd probably never again need to know a thing out of any medic journal.

Doc pushed the journal to one side and sat there, wondering what was wrong with him. He'd been reading for twenty minutes and none of it had registered. He couldn't have told a word that he had read.

Too upset, he thought. Too excited about Operation Kelly. And wasn't that a thing to call it - Operation Kelly!

And he remembered it once again exactly.

How he'd tried it out on Millville, then gone to the county medical association and how the doctors in the county, after some slight amount of scoffing and a good deal of skepticism, had become convinced. And from there it had gone to state and the AMA.

And finally that great day in the United Nations, when the Ellen had appeared before the delegates and when he, himself, had been introduced - and at last the great London man arising to suggest that

the project could be called nothing else but Kelly.

A proud moment, he told himself - and he tried to call up the pride again, but it wasn't there, not the whole of it. Never in his life again would he know that kind of pride.

And here he sat, a simple country doctor once again, in his study late at night, trying to catch up with reading he never seemed to get the time to do.

Although that was no longer strictly true. Now he had all the time there was.

He reached out and pulled the journal underneath the lamp and settled down to read.

But it was slow going.

He went back and read a paragraph anew.

And that, he told himself, was not the way it should be.

Either he was getting old or his eyes were going bad or he was plain stupid.

And that was the word - that was the key to the thing that it had seemed he should have been able to just reach out and grab.

Stupid!

Probably not actually stupid. Maybe just a little slow. Not really less intelligent, but not so sharp and bright as he had been. Not so quick to catch the hang of things.

Martha Anderson had forgotten how much yeast to use in those famous, prize-winning rolls of hers. And that was something that Martha should never have forgotten.

Con had paid his bill, and on the scale of values that Con had subscribed to all his life, that was plain stupidity. The bright thing, the sharp thing would have been for Con, now that he'd probably never need a doctor, just to forget the obligation. After all, it would not have been hard to do; he'd been forgetful of it up to this very night.

And the alien had said something that, at the time, he'd thought of as a joke.

'Never fear,' the alien had said, 'we'll cure all your ills. Including,

more than likely, a few you don't suspect.'

And was intelligence a disease?

It was hard to think of it as such.

And yet, when any race was as obsessed with intelligence as Man was, it might be classed as one.

When it ran rampant as it had during the last half century, when it piled progress on top of progress, technology on top of technology, when it ran so fast that no man caught his breath, then it might be disease.

Not quite so sharp, thought Doc. Not quite so quick to grasp the meaning of a paragraph loaded with medical terminology - being forced to go a little slower to pack it in his mind.

And was that really bad?

Some of the stupidest people he'd ever known, he told himself, had been the happiest.

And while one could not make out of that a brief for planned stupidity, it at least might be a plea for a less harassed humanity.

He pushed the journal to one side and sat staring at the light.

It would be felt in Millville first because Millville had been the pilot project. And six months from tomorrow night it would be felt in all the world.

How far would it go, he wondered - for that, after all, was the vital question.

Only slightly less sharp?

Back to bumbling?

Clear back to the ape?

There was no way one could tell...

And all he had to do to stop it was pick up the phone.

He sat there, frozen with the thought that perhaps Operation Kelly should be stopped - that after all the years of death and pain and misery, Man must buy it back.

But the aliens, he thought - the aliens would not let it go too far. Whoever they might be, he believed they were decent people.

Maybe there had been no basic understanding, no meeting of the minds, and yet there had been a common ground - the very simple ground of compassion for the blind and halt.

But if he were wrong, he wondered - what if the aliens proposed to limit Man's powers of self-destruction even if that meant reducing him to abject stupidity... what was the answer then? And what if the plan was to soften man up before invasion?

Sitting there, he knew.

Knew that no matter what the odds were against his being right, there was nothing he could do.

Realized that as a judge in a matter such as this he was unqualified, that he was filled with bias, and could not change himself.

He'd been a doctor too long to stop Operation Kelly.

All the Traps of Earth

THE INVENTORY list was long. On its many pages, in his small and precise script, he had listed furniture, paintings, china, silverware and all the rest of it - all the personal belongings that had been accumulated by the Barringtons through a long family history.

And now that he had reached the end of it, he noted down himself, the last item of them all:

One domestic robot, Richard Daniel, antiquated but in good repair.

He laid the pen aside and shuffled all the inventory sheets together and stacked them in good order, putting a paper weight upon them - the little exquisitely carved ivory paper weight that aunt Hortense had picked up that last visit she had made to Peking.

And having done that, his job came to an end.

He shoved back the chair and rose from the desk and slowly walked across the living room, with all its clutter of possessions from the family's past. There, above the mantel, hung the sword that ancient Jonathon had worn in the War Between the States, and below

it, on the mantelpiece itself, the cup the Commodore had won with his valiant yacht, and the jar of moon-dust that Tony had brought back from Man's fifth landing on the Moon, and the old chronometer that had come from the long-scrapped family spacecraft that had plied the asteroids.

And all around the room, almost cheek by jowl, hung the family portraits, with the old dead faces staring out into the world that they had helped to fashion.

And not a one of them from the last six hundred years, thought Richard Daniel, staring at them one by one, that he had not known.

There, to the right of the fireplace, old Rufus Andrew Barrington, who had been a judge some two hundred years ago. And to the right of Rufus, Johnson Joseph Barrington, who had headed up that old lost dream of mankind, the Bureau of Paranormal Research. There, beyond the door that led out to the porch, was the scowling pirate face of Danley Barrington, who had first built the family fortune.

And many others - administrator, adventurer, corporation chief. All good men and true.

But this was at an end. The family had run out.

Slowly Richard Daniel began his last tour of the house - the family room with its cluttered living space, the den with its old mementos, the library and its rows of ancient books, the dining hall in which the crystal and the china shone and sparkled, the kitchen gleaming with the copper and aluminum and the stainless steel, and the bedrooms on the second floor, each of them with its landmarks of former occupants. And finally, the bedroom where old Aunt Hortense had finally died, at long last closing out the line of Barringtons.

The empty dwelling held a not-quite-haunted quality, the aura of a house that waited for the old gay life to take up once again. But it was a false aura. All the portraits, all the china and the silverware, everything within the house would be sold at public auction to satisfy the debts. The rooms would be stripped and the possessions would be scattered and, as a last indignity, the house itself be sold.

Even he, himself, Richard Daniel thought, for he was chattel, too. He was there with all the rest of it, the final item on the inventory.

Except that what they planned to do with him was worse than simple sale. For he would be changed before he was offered up for sale. No one would be interested in putting up good money for him as he stood. And, besides, there was the law - the law that said no robot could legally have continuation of a single life greater than a hundred years.

And he had lived in a single life six times a hundred years. He had gone to see a lawyer and the lawyer had been sympathetic, but had held forth no hope.

"Technically," he had told Richard Daniel in his short, clipped lawyer voice, "you are at this moment much in violation of the statute. I completely fail to see how your family got away with it."

"They liked old things," said Richard Daniel. "And, besides, I was very seldom seen. I stayed mostly in the house. I seldom ventured out."

"Even so," the lawyer said, "there are such things as records. There must be a file on you..."

"The family," explained Richard Daniel, "in the past had many influential friends. You must understand, sir, that the Barringtons, before they fell upon hard times, were quite prominent in politics and in many other matters."

The lawyer grunted knowingly.

"What I can't quite understand," he said, "is why you should object so bitterly. You'll not be changed entirely. You'll still be Richard Daniel."

"I would lose my memories, would I not?'

"Yes, of course you would. But memories are not too important. And you'd collect another set."

"My memories are dear to me," Richard Daniel told him.

"They are all I have. After some six hundred years, they are my sole worthwhile possession. Can you imagine, counselor, what it means to

spend six centuries with one family?"

"Yes, I think I can," agreed the lawyer. "But now, with the family gone, isn't it just possible the memories may prove painful?"

"They're a comfort. A sustaining comfort. They make me feel important. They give me perspective and a niche."

"But don't you understand? You'll need no comfort, no importance once you're reoriented. You'll be brand new. All that you'll retain is a certain sense of basic identity - that they cannot take away from you even if they wished. There'll be nothing to regret. There'll be no leftover guilts, no frustrated aspirations, no old loyalties to hound you."

"I must be myself," Richard Daniel insisted stubbornly. "I've found a depth of living, a background against which my living has some meaning. I could not face being anybody else."

"You'd be far better off," the lawyer said wearily. "You'd have a better body. You'd have better mental tools. You'd be more intelligent."

Richard Daniel got up from the chair. He saw it was no use.

"You'll not inform on me?" he asked.

"Certainly not," the lawyer said. "So far as I'm concerned, you aren't even here."

"Thank you," said Richard Daniel. "How much do I owe you?"

"Not a thing," the lawyer told him. "I never make a charge to anyone who is older than five hundred."

He had meant it as a joke, but Richard Daniel did not smile. He had not felt like smiling.

At the door he turned around.

"Why?" he was going to ask. "Why this silly law."

But he did not have to ask - it was not hard to see.

Human vanity, he knew. No human being lived much longer than a hundred years, so neither could a robot. But a robot, on the other hand, was too valuable simply to be junked at the end of a hundred years of service, so there was this law providing for the periodic breakup of the continuity of each robot's life. And thus no human need

undergo the psychological indignity of knowing that his faithful serving man might manage to outlive him by several thousand years.

It was illogical, but humans were illogical.

Illogical, but kind. Kind in many different ways.

Kind, sometimes, as the Barringtons had been kind, thought Richard Daniel. Six hundred years of kindness. It was a prideful thing to think about. They had even given him a double name. There weren't many robots nowadays who had double names. It was a special mark of affection and respect.

The lawyer having failed him, Richard Daniel had sought another source of help. Now, thinking back on it, standing in the room where Hortense Barrington had died, he was sorry that he'd done it. For he had embarrassed the religico almost unendurably. It had been easy for the lawyer to tell him what he had. Lawyers had the statutes to determine their behavior, and thus suffered little from agonies of personal decision.

But a man of the cloth is kind if he is worth his salt. And this one had been kind instinctively as well as professionally, and that had made it worse.

"Under certain circumstances," he had said somewhat awkwardly, "I could counsel patience and humility and prayer. Those are three great aids to anyone who is willing to put them to his use. But with you I am not certain."

"You mean," said Richard Daniel, "because I am a robot." "Well, now..." said the minister, considerably befuddled at this direct approach.

"Because I have no soul?"

"Really," said the minister miserably, "you place me at a disadvantage. You are asking me a question that for centuries has puzzled and bedeviled the best minds in the church."

"But one," said Richard Daniel, "that each man in his secret heart must answer for himself."

"I wish I could," cried the distraught minister. "I truly wish I could."

"If it is any help," said Richard Daniel, "I can tell you that sometimes I suspect I have a soul."

And that, he could see, had been most upsetting for this kindly human. It had been, Richard Daniel told himself, unkind of him to say it. For it must have been confusing, since coming from himself it was not opinion only, but expert evidence.

So he had gone away from the minister's study and come back to the empty house to get on with his inventory work.

Now that the inventory was all finished and the papers stacked where Dancourt, the estate administrator, could find them when be showed up in the morning, Richard Daniel had done his final service for the Barringtons and now must begin doing for himself.

He left the bedroom and closed the door behind him and went quietly down the stairs and along the hallway to the little cubby, back of the kitchen, that was his very own.

And that, he reminded himself with a rush of pride, was of a piece with his double name and his six hundred years. There were not too many robots who had a room, however small, that they might call their own.

He went into the cubby and turned on the light and closed the door behind him.

And now, for the first time, he faced the grim reality of what he meant to do.

The cloak and hat and trousers hung upon a hook and the galoshes were placed precisely underneath them. His attachment kit lay in one corner of the cubby and the money was cached underneath the floor board he had loosened many years ago to provide a hiding place.

There was, he, told himself, no point in waiting. Every minute counted. He had a long way to go and he must be at his destination before morning light.

He knelt on the floor and pried up the loosened board, shoved in a hand and brought out the stacks of bills, money hidden through the years against a day of need.

There were three stacks of bills, neatly held together by elastic bands - money given him throughout the years as tips and Christmas gifts, as birthday presents and rewards for little jobs well done.

He opened the storage compartment located in his chest and stowed away all the bills except for half a dozen which he stuffed into a pocket in one hip.

He took the trousers off the hook and it was an awkward business, for he'd never worn clothes before except when he'd tried on these very trousers several days before. It was a lucky thing, he thought, that long-dead Uncle Michael had been a portly man, for otherwise the trousers never would have fit.

He got them on and zippered and belted into place, then forced his feet into the overshoes. He was a little worried about the overshoes. No human went out in the summer wearing overshoes. But it was the best that he could do. None of the regular shoes he'd found in the house had been nearly large enough.

He hoped no one would notice, but there was no way out of it. Somehow or other, he had to cover up his feet, for if anyone should see them, they'd be a giveaway.

He put on the cloak and it was a little short. He put on the hat and it was slightly small, but he tugged it down until it gripped his metal skull and that was all to the good, he told himself; no wind could blow it off.

He picked up his attachments - a whole bag full of them that he'd almost never used. Maybe it was foolish to take them along, he thought, but they were a part of him and by rights they should go with him. There was so little that he really owned - just the money he had saved, a dollar at a time, and this kit of his.

With the bag of attachments clutched underneath his arm, he closed the cubby door and went down the hall.

At the big front door he hesitated and turned back toward the house, but it was, at the moment, a simple darkened cave, empty of all that it once had held. There was nothing here to stay for - nothing but the memories, and the memories he took with him.

He opened the door and stepped out on the stoop and closed the door behind him.

And now, he thought, with the door once shut behind him, he was on his own. He was running off. He was wearing clothes. He was out at night, without the permission of a master. And all of these were against the law.

Any officer could stop him, or any citizen. He had no rights at all. And he had no one who would speak for him, now that the Barringtons were gone.

He moved quietly down the walk and opened the gate and went slowly down the street, and it seemed to him the house was calling for him to come back. He wanted to go back, his mind said that he should go back, but his feet kept going on, steadily down the street.

He was alone, he thought, and the aloneness now was real, no longer the mere intellectual abstract he'd held in his mind for days. Here he was, a vacant hulk, that for the moment had no purpose and no beginning and no end, but was just an entity that stood naked in an endless reach of space and time and held no meaning in itself.

But he walked on and with each block that he covered he slowly fumbled back to the thing he was, the old robot in old clothes, the robot running from a home that was a home no longer.

He wrapped the cloak about him tightly and moved on down the street and now he hurried, for he had to hurry.

He met several people and they paid no attention to him. A few cars passed, but no one bothered him.

He came to a shopping center that was brightly lighted and he stopped and looked in terror at the wide expanse of open, brilliant space that lay ahead of him. He could detour around it, but it would use up time and he stood there, undecided, trying to screw up his courage to walk into the light.

Finally he made up his mind and strode briskly out, with his cloak wrapped tight about him and his hat pulled low.

Some of the shoppers turned and looked at him and he felt

agitated spiders running up and down his back. The galoshes suddenly seemed three times as big as they really were and they made a plopping, squashy sound that was most embarrassing.

He hurried on, with the end of the shopping area not more than a block away.

A police whistle shrilled and Richard Daniel jumped in sudden fright and ran. He ran in slobbering, mindless fright, with his cloak streaming out behind him and his feet slapping on the pavement.

He plunged out of the lighted strip into the welcome darkness of a residential section and he kept on running.

Far off he heard the siren and he leaped a hedge and tore across the yard. He thundered down the driveway and across a garden in the back and a dog came roaring out and engaged in noisy chase.

Richard Daniel crashed into a picket fence and went through it to the accompaniment of snapping noises as the pickets and the rails gave way. The dog kept on behind him and other dogs joined in.

He crossed another yard and gained the street and pounded down it. He dodged into a driveway, crossed another yard, upset a birdbath and ran into a clothesline, snapping it in his headlong rush.

Behind him lights were snapping on in the windows of the houses and screen doors were banging as people hurried out to see what the ruckus was.

He ran on a few more blocks, crossed another yard and ducked into a lilac thicket, stood still and listened. Some dogs were still baying in the distance and there was some human shouting, but there was no siren.

He felt a thankfulness well up in him that there was no siren, and a sheepishness, as well. For he had been panicked by himself, be knew; he had run from shadows, he had fled from guilt.

But he'd thoroughly roused the neighborhood and even now, he knew, calls must be going out and in a little while the place would be swarming with police.

He'd raised a hornet's nest and he needed distance, so he crept

out of the lilac thicket and went swiftly down the street, heading for the edge of town.

He finally left the city, and found the highway. He loped along its deserted stretches. When a car or truck appeared, he pulled off on the shoulder and walked along sedately. Then when the car or truck had passed, he broke into his lope again.

He saw the spaceport lights miles before he got there.

When he reached the port, he circled off the road and came up outside a fence and stood there in the darkness, looking.

A gang of robots was loading one great starship and there were other ships standing darkly in their pits.

He studied the gang that was loading the ship, lugging the cargo from a warehouse and across the area lighted by the floods. This was just the setup he had planned on, although he had not hoped to find it immediately - he had been afraid that he might have to hide out for a day or two before he found a situation that he could put to use. And it was a good thing that he had stumbled on this opportunity, for an intensive hunt would be on by now for a fleeing robot, dressed in human clothes.

He stripped off the cloak and pulled off the trousers and the overshoes; he threw away the hat. From his attachments bag he took out the cutters, screwed off a hand and threaded the cutters into place. He cut the fence and wiggled through it, then replaced the hand and put the cutters back into the kit.

Moving cautiously in the darkness, he walked up to the warehouse, keeping in its shadow.

It would be simple, he told himself. All he had to do was step out and grab a piece of cargo, clamber up the ramp and down into the hold. Once inside, it should not be difficult to find a hiding place and stay there until the ship had reached first planet-fall.

He moved to the corner of the warehouse and peered around it and there were the toiling robots, in what amounted to an endless chain, going up the ramp with the packages of cargo, coming down again to

get another load.

But there were too many of them and the line too tight. And the area too well lighted. He'd never be able to break into that line.

And it would not help if he could, he realized despairingly - because he was different from those smooth and shining creatures. Compared to them, he was like a man in another century's dress; he and his six-hundred-year-old body would stand out like a circus freak.

He stepped back into the shadow of the warehouse and he knew that be had lost. All his best-laid plans, thought out in sober, daring detail, as he had labored at the inventory, had suddenly come to naught.

It all came, he told himself, from never going out, from having no real contact with the world, from not keeping up with robot-body fashions, from not knowing what the score was. He'd imagined how it would be and he'd got it all worked out and when it came down, to it, it was nothing like he thought.

Now he'd have to go back to the hole he'd cut in the fence and retrieve the clothing be had thrown away and hunt up a hiding place until be could think of something else.

Beyond the corner of the warehouse he heard the harsh, dull grate of metal, and he took another look.

The robots had broken up their line and were streaming back toward the warehouse and a dozen or so of them were wheeling the ramp away from the cargo port. Three humans, all dressed in uniform, were walking toward the ship, heading for the ladder, and one of them carried a batch of papers in his hand.

The loading was all done and the ship about to lift and here he was, not more than a thousand feet away, and all that he could do was stand and see it go.

There had to be a way, he told himself, to get in that ship. If he could only do it his troubles would be over - or at least the first of his troubles would be over.

Suddenly it struck him like a hand across the face. There was a

way to do it! He'd stood here, blubbering, when all the time there had been a way to do it!

In the ship, he'd thought. And that was not necessary.

He didn't have to be in the ship.

He started running, out into the darkness, far out so he could circle round and come upon the ship from the other side, so that the ship would be between him and the flood lights on the warehouse. He hoped that there was time.

He thudded out across the port, running in an arc, and came up to the ship and there was no sign as yet that it was about to leave.

Frantically he dug into his attachments bag and found the things he needed - the last things in that bag he'd ever thought he'd need. He found the suction discs and put them on, one for each knee, one for each elbow, one for each sole and wrist.

He strapped the kit about his waist and clambered up one of the mighty fins, using the discs to pull himself awkwardly along. It was not easy. He had never used the discs and there was a trick to using them, the trick of getting one clamped down and then working loose another so that be could climb.

But he had to do it. He had no choice but to do it. He climbed the fin and there was the vast steel body of the craft rising far above him, like a metal wall climbing to the sky, broken by the narrow line of a row of anchor posts that ran lengthwise of the hull - and all that huge extent of metal painted by the faint, illusive shine of starlight that glittered in his eyes.

Foot by foot he worked his way up the metal wall. Like a humping caterpillar, he squirmed his way and with each foot he gained he was a bit more thankful.

Then he heard the faint beginning of a rumble and with the rumble came terror. His suction cups, he knew, might not long survive the booming vibration of the wakening rockets, certainly would not hold for a moment when the ship began to climb.

Six feet above him lay his only hope - the final anchor post in the

long row of anchor posts.

Savagely he drove himself up the barrel of the shuddering craft, hugging the steely surface like a desperate fly.

The rumble of the tubes built up to blot out all the world and he climbed in a haze of almost prayerful, brittle hope. He reached that anchor post or he was as good as dead. Should he slip and drop into that pit of flaming gases beneath the rocket mouths and he was done for.

Once a cup came loose and he almost fell, but the others held and he caught himself.

With a desperate, almost careless lunge, he hurled himself up the wall of metal and caught the rung in his finger-tips and held on with a concentration of effort that wiped out all else.

The rumble was a screaming fury now that lanced through brain and body. Then the screaming ended and became a throaty roar of power and the vibration left the ship entirely. From one corner of his eye he saw the lights of the spaceport swinging over gently on their side.

Carefully, slowly, be pulled himself along the steel until he had a better grip upon the rung, but even with the better grip he had the feeling that some great hand had him in its fist and was swinging him in anger in a hundred-mile-long arc.

Then the tubes left off their howling and there was a terrible silence and the stars were there, up above him and to either side of him, and they were steely stars with no twinkle in them. Down below, be knew, a lonely Earth was swinging, but he could not see it.

He pulled himself up against the rung and thrust a leg beneath it and sat up on the hull.

There were more stars than he'd ever seen before, more than he'd dreamed there could be. They were still and cold, like hard points of light against a velvet curtain; there was no glitter and no twinkle in them and it was as if a million eyes were staring down at him. The Sun was underneath the ship and over to one side; just at the edge of the left-hand curvature was the glare of it against the silent metal, a

sliver of reflected light outlining one edge of the ship. The Earth was far astern, a ghostly blue-green ball hanging in the void, ringed by the fleecy halo of its atmosphere.

It was as if he were detached, a lonely, floating brain that looked out upon a thing it could not understand nor could ever try to understand; as if he might even be afraid of understanding it - a thing of mystery and delight so long as he retained an ignorance of it, but something fearsome and altogether overpowering once the ignorance had gone.

Richard Daniel sat there, flat upon his bottom, on the metal hull of the speeding ship and he felt the mystery and delight and the loneliness and the cold and the great uncaring and his mind retreated into a small and huddled, compact defensive ball.

He looked. That was all there was to do. It was all right now, he thought. But how long would he have to look at it? How long would he have to camp out here in the open - the most deadly kind of open?

He realized for the first time that he had no idea where the ship was going or how long it might take to get there. He knew it was a starship, which meant that it was bound beyond the solar system, and that meant that at some point in its flight it would enter hyperspace. He wondered, at first academically, and then with a twinge of fear, what hyperspace might do to one sitting naked to it. But there was little need, he thought philosophically, to fret about it now, for in due time he'd know, and there was not a thing that he could do about it - not a single thing.

He took the suction cups off his body and stowed them in his kit and then with one hand he tied the kit to one of the metal rungs and dug around in it until he found a short length of steel cable with a ring on one end and a snap on the other. He passed the ring end underneath a rung and threaded the snap end through it and snapped the snap onto a metal loop underneath his armpit. Now he was secured; he need not fear carelessly letting go and floating off the ship.

So here he was, he thought, neat as anything, going places fast,

even if he had no idea where he might be headed, and now the only thing he needed was patience. He thought back, without much point, to what the religico had said in the study back on Earth. Patience and humility and prayer, he'd said, apparently not realizing at the moment that a robot has a world of patience.

It would take a lot of time, Richard Daniel knew, to get where he was going. But he had a lot of time, a lot more than any human, and he could afford to waste it. There were no urgencies, he thought - no need of food or air, or water, no need of sleep or rest... There was nothing that could touch him.

Although, come to think of it, there might be.

There was the cold, for one. The space-hull was still fairly warm, with one side of it picking up the heat of the Sun and radiating it around the metal skin, where it was lost on the other side, but there would be a time when the Sun would dwindle until it had no heat and then he'd be subjected to the utter cold of space.

And what would the cold do to him. Might it make his body brittle? Might it interfere with the functioning of his brain? Might it do other things he could not even guess?

He felt the fears creep in again and tried to shrug them off and they drew off, but they still were there, lurking at the fringes of his mind.

The cold, and the loneliness, he thought - but he was one who could cope with loneliness. And if he couldn't, if he got too lonely, if he could no longer stand it, he could always beat a devil's tattoo on the hull and after a time of that someone would come out to investigate and they would haul him in.

But that was the last move of desperation, he told himself. For if they came out and found him, then he would be caught. Should he be forced to that extremity, he'd have lost everything - there would then have been no point in leaving Earth at all.

So he settled down, living out his time, keeping the creeping fears at bay just beyond the outposts of his mind, and looking at the universe all spread out before him.

The motors started up again with a pale blue flickering in the rockets at the stern and although there was no sense of acceleration he knew that the ship, now well off the Earth, had settled down to the long, hard drive to reach the speed of light.

Once they reached that speed they would enter hyperspace. He tried not to think of it, tried to tell himself there was not a thing to fear - but it hung there just ahead of him, the great unknowable.

The Sun shrank until it was only one of many stars and there came a time when he could no longer pick it out. And the cold clamped down but it didn't seem to bother him, although he could sense the coldness.

Maybe, he said in answer to his fear, that would be the way it would be with hyperspace as well. But he said it unconvincingly. The ship drove on and on with the weird blueness in the tubes.

Then there was the instant when his mind went splattering across the universe.

He was aware of the ship, but only aware of it in relation to an awareness of much else, and it was no anchor point, no rallying position. He was spread and scattered; he was opened out and rolled out until he was very thin. He was a dozen places, perhaps a hundred places, all at once, and it was confusing, and his immediate reaction was to fight back somehow against whatever might have happened to him - to fight back and pull himself together. The fighting did no good at all, but made it even worse, for in certain instances it seemed to drive parts of him farther from other parts of him and the confusion was made greater.

So he quit his fighting and his struggling and just lay there, scattered, and let the panic ebb away and told himself he didn't care, and wondered if he did.

Slow reason returned a dribble at a time and he could think again and he wondered rather bleakly if this could be hyperspace and was pretty sure it was. And if it were, he knew, he'd have a long time to live like this, a long time in which to become accustomed to it and to

orient himself, a long time to find himself and pull himself together, a long time to understand this situation if it were, in fact, understandable.

So he lay, not caring greatly, with no fear or wonder, just resting and letting a fact seep into him here and there from many different points.

He knew that, somehow, his body - that part of him which housed the rest of him - was still chained securely to the ship, and that knowledge, in itself, he knew, was the first small step towards reorienting himself. He had to reorient, he knew. He had to come to some sort of terms, if not to understanding, with this situation.

He had opened up and he had scattered out - that essential part of him, the feeling and the knowing and the thinking part of him, and he lay thin across a universe that loomed immense in unreality.

Was this, he wondered, the way the universe should be, or was it the unchained universe, the wild universe beyond the limiting disciplines of measured space and time.

He started slowly reaching out, cautious as he had been in his crawling on the surface of the ship, reaching out toward the distant parts of him, a little at a time. He did not know how he did it, he was conscious of no particular technique, but whatever he was doing, it seemed to work, for he pulled himself together, bit by knowing bit, until he had gathered up all the scattered fragments of him into several different piles.

Then he quit and lay there, wherever there might be, and tried to sneak up on those piles of understanding that he took to be himself.

It took a while to get the hang of it, but once be did, some of the incomprehensibility went away, although the strangeness stayed. He tried to put it into thought and it was hard to do. The closest he could come was that he had been unchained as well as the universe - that whatever bondage had been imposed upon him by that chained and normal world had now become dissolved and he no longer was fenced in by either time or space.

He could see - and know and sense - across vast distances, if

distance were the proper term, and he could understand certain facts that he had not even thought about before, could understand instinctively, but without the language or the skill to coalesce the facts into independent data.

Once again the universe was spread far out before him and it was a different and in some ways a better universe, a more diagrammatic universe, and in time, he knew, if there were such a thing as time, he'd gain some completer understanding and acceptance of it.

He probed and sensed and learned and there was no such thing as time, but a great foreverness.

He thought with pity of those others locked inside the ship, safe behind its insulating walls, never knowing all the glories of the innards of a star or the vast panoramic sweep of vision and of knowing far above the flat galactic plane.

Yet he really did not know what he saw or probed; he merely sensed and felt it and became a part of it, and it became a part of him - he seemed unable to reduce it to a formal outline of fact or of dimension or of content. It still remained a knowledge and a power so overwhelming that it was nebulous. There was no fear and no wonder, for in this place, it seemed, there was neither fear nor wonder. And he finally knew that it was a place apart, a world in which the normal space-time knowledge and emotion had no place at all and a normal space-time being could have no tools or measuring stick by which he might reduce it to a frame of reference.

There was no time, no space, no fear, no wonder - and no actual knowledge, either.

Then time came once again and suddenly his mind was stuffed back into its cage within his metal skull and he was again one with his body, trapped and chained and small and cold and naked.

He saw that the stars were different and that he was far from home and just a little way ahead was a star that blazed like a molten furnace hanging in the black.

He sat bereft, a small thing once again, and the universe reduced

to package size.

Practically, he checked the cable that held him to the ship and it was intact. His attachments kit was still tied to its rung. Everything was exactly as it had been before.

He tried to recall the glories he had seen, tried to grasp again the fringe of knowledge which he had been so close to, but both the glory and the knowledge, if there had ever been a knowledge, had faded into nothingness.

He felt like weeping, but he could not weep, and he was too old to lie down upon the ship and kick his heels in tantrum.

So he sat there, looking at the sun that they were approaching and finally there was a planet that he knew must be their destination, and he found room to wonder what planet it might be and how far from Earth it was.

He heated up a little as the ship skipped through atmosphere as an aid to braking speed and he had some rather awful moments as it spiraled into thick and soupy gases that certainly were a far cry from the atmosphere of Earth. He hung most desperately to the rungs as the craft came rushing down onto a landing field, with the hot gases of the rockets curling up about him. But he made it safely and swiftly clambered down and darted off into the smog-like atmosphere before anyone could see him.

Safely off, he turned and looked back at the ship and despite its outlines being hidden by the drifting clouds of swirling gases, he could see it clearly, not as an actual structure, but as a diagram. He looked at it wonderingly and there was something wrong with the diagram, something vaguely wrong, some part of it that was out of whack and not the way it should be.

He heard the clanking of cargo haulers coming out upon the field and he wasted no more time, diagram or not.

He drifted back, deeper in the mists, and began to circle, keeping a good distance from the ship. Finally he came to the spaceport's edge and the beginning of the town.

He found a street and walked down it leisurely and there was a wrongness in the town.

He met a few hurrying robots who were in too much of a rush to pass the time of day. But he met no humans.

And that, he knew quite suddenly, was the wrongness of the place. It was not a human town.

There were no distinctly human buildings -no stores or residences, no churches and no restaurants. There were gaunt shelter barracks and sheds for the storing of equipment and machines, great sprawling warehouses and vast industrial plants. But that was all there was. It was a bare and dismal place compared to the streets that he had known on Earth.

It was a robot town, he knew. And a robot planet. A world that was barred to humans, a place where humans could not live, but so rich in some natural resource that it cried for exploitation. And the answer to that exploitation was to let the robots do it.

Luck, he told himself. His good luck still was holding. He had literally been dumped into a place where he could live without human interference. Here, on this planet, he would be with his own.

If that was what he wanted. And he wondered if it was. He wondered just exactly what it was he wanted, for he'd had no time to think of what he wanted. He had been too intent on fleeing Earth to think too much about it. He had known all along what he was running from, but had not considered what he might be running to.

He walked a little further and the town came to an end. The Street became a path and went wandering on into the wind-blown fogginess.

So he turned around and went back up the street.

There had been one barracks, he remembered, that had a TRANSIENTS sign hung out, and be made his way to it.

Inside, an ancient robot sat behind the desk. His body was old-fashioned and somehow familiar. And it was familiar, Richard Daniel knew, because it was as old and battered and as out-of-date as his.

He looked at the body, just a bit aghast, and saw that while it

resembled his, there were little differences. The same ancient model, certainly, but a different series. Possibly a little newer, by twenty years or so, than his.

"Good evening, stranger," said the ancient robot. "You came in on the ship?"

Richard Daniel nodded.

"You'll be staying till the next one?"

"I may be settling down," said Richard Daniel. "I may want to stay here."

The ancient robot took a key from off a hook and laid it on the desk.

"You representing someone?"

"No," said Richard Daniel.

"I thought maybe that you were. We get a lot of representatives. Humans can't come here, or don't want to come, so they send robots out here to represent them."

"You have a lot of visitors?"

"Some. Mostly the representatives I was telling you about. But there are some that are on the lam. I'd take it, mister, you are on the lam."

Richard Daniel didn't answer.

"It's all right," the ancient one assured him. "We don't mind at all, just so you behave yourself. Some of our most prominent citizens, they came here on the lam."

"That is fine," said Richard Daniel. "And how about yourself? You must be on the lam as well."

"You mean this body. Well, that's a little different. This here is punishment."

"Punishment?'

"Well, you see, I was the foreman of the cargo warehouse and I got to goofing off. So they hauled me up and had a trial and they found me guilty. Then they stuck me into this old body and I have to stay in it, at this lousy job, until they get another criminal that needs punishment. They can't punish no more than one criminal at a time because this is the only old body that they have. Funny thing about this body. One of

the boys went back to Earth on a business trip and found this old heap of metal in a junkyard and brought it home with him - for a joke, I guess. Like a human might buy a skeleton for a joke, you know."

He took a long, sly look at Richard Daniel. "It looks to me, stranger, as if your body..."

But Richard Daniel didn't let him finish.

"I take it," Richard Daniel said, "you haven't many criminals."

"No," said the ancient robot sadly, "we're generally a pretty solid lot."

Richard Daniel reached out to pick up the key, but the ancient robot put out his hand and covered it.

"Since you are on the lam," he said, "it'll be payment in advance."

"I'll pay you for a week," said Richard Daniel, handing him some money.

The robot gave him back his change.

"One thing I forgot to tell you. You'll have to get plasticated."

"Plasticated?"

"That's right. Get plastic squirted over you. To protect you from the atmosphere. It plays hell with metal. There's a place next door will do it."

"Thanks. I'll get it done immediately."

"It wears off," warned the ancient one. "You have to get a new job every week or so."

Richard Daniel took the key and went down the corridor until he found his numbered cubicle. He unlocked the door and stepped inside. The room was small, but clean. It had a desk and chair and that was all it had.

He stowed his attachments bag in one corner and sat down in the chair and tried to feel at home. But he couldn't feel at home, and that was a funny thing - he'd just rented himself a home.

He sat there, thinking back, and tried to whip up some sense of triumph at having done so well in covering his tracks. He couldn't.

Maybe this wasn't the place for him, he thought. Maybe he'd be

happier on some other planet. Perhaps he should go back to the ship and get on it once again and have a look at the next planet coming up.

If he hurried, he might make it. But he'd have to hurry, for the ship wouldn't stay longer than it took to unload the consignment for this place and take on new cargo.

He got up from the chair, still only half decided.

And suddenly he remembered how, standing in the swirling mistiness, he had seen the ship as a diagram rather than a ship, and as he thought about it, something clicked inside his brain and he leaped toward the door.

For now he knew what had been wrong with the spaceship's diagram - an injector valve was somehow out of kilter, he had to get back there before the ship took off again.

He went through the door and down the corridor. He caught sight of the ancient robot's startled face as he ran across the lobby and out into the street. Pounding steadily toward the spaceport, he tried to get the diagram into his mind again, but it would not come complete - it came in bits and pieces, but not all of it.

And even as be fought for the entire diagram, he heard the beginning take-off rumble.

"Wait!" he yelled. "Wait for me! You can't..."

There was a flash that turned the world pure white and a mighty invisible wave came swishing out of nowhere and sent him reeling down the street, falling as he reeled. He was skidding on the cobblestones and sparks were flying as his metal scraped along the stone. The whiteness reached a brilliance that almost blinded him and then it faded swiftly and the world was dark.

He brought up against a wall of some sort, clanging as he hit, and he lay there, blind from the brilliance of the flash, while his mind went scurrying down the trail of the diagram.

The diagram, he thought - why should he have seen a diagram of the ship he'd ridden through space, a diagram that had shown an

injector out of whack? And how could he, of all robots, recognize an injector, let alone know there was something wrong with it. It had been a joke back home, among the Barringtons, that he, a mechanical thing himself, should have no aptitude at all for mechanical contraptions. And he could have saved those people and the ship - he could have saved them all if he'd immediately recognized the significance of the diagram. But he'd been too slow and stupid and now they all were dead.

The darkness had receded from his eyes and he could see again and he got slowly to his feet, feeling himself all over to see how badly he was hurt. Except for a dent or two, he seemed to be all right.

There were robots running in the street, heading for the spaceport, where a dozen fires were burning and where sheds and other structures had been flattened by the blast.

Someone tugged at his elbow and he turned around. It was the ancient robot.

"You're the lucky one," the ancient robot said. "You got off it just in time."

Richard Daniel nodded dumbly and had a terrible thought:

What if they should think he did it? He had gotten off the ship; he had admitted that he was on the lam; he had rushed out suddenly, just a few seconds before the ship exploded. It would be easy to put it all together - that he had sabotaged the ship, then at the last instant had rushed out, remorseful, to undo what he had done. On the face of it, it was damning evidence.

But it was all right as yet, Richard Daniel told himself. For the ancient robot was the only one that knew - he was the only one he'd talked to, the only one who even knew that he was in town.

There was a way, Richard Daniel thought - there was an easy way. He pushed the thought away, but it came back. You are on your own, it said. You are already beyond the law. In rejecting human law, you made yourself an outlaw. You have become fair prey. There is just one law for you - self preservation.

But there are robot laws, Richard Daniel argued. There are laws and courts in this community. There is a place for justice.

Community law, said the leech clinging in his brain, provincial law, little more than tribal law - and the stranger's always wrong.

Richard Daniel felt the coldness of the fear closing down upon him and he knew, without half thinking, that the leech was right.

He turned around and started down the street, heading for the transients barracks. Something unseen in the street caught his foot and he stumbled and went down. He scrabbled to his knees, hunting in the darkness on the cobblestones for the thing that tripped him. It was a heavy bar of steel, some part of the wreckage that had been hurled this far. He gripped it by one end and arose.

"Sorry," said the ancient robot. "You have to watch your step."

And there was a faint implication in his word - a hint of something more than the words had said, a hint of secret gloating in a secret knowledge.

You have broken other laws, said the leech in Richard Daniel's brain. What of breaking just one more? Why, if necessary, not break a hundred more. It is all or nothing. Having come this far, you can't afford to fail. You can allow no one to stand in your way now.

The ancient robot half turned away and Richard Daniel lifted up the bar of steel, and suddenly the ancient robot no longer was a robot, but a diagram. There, with all the details of a blueprint, were all the working parts, all the mechanism of the robot that walked in the street before him. And if one detached that single bit of wire, if one burned out that coil, if - Even as he thought it, the diagram went away and there was the robot, a stumbling, failing robot that clanged on the cobblestones.

Richard Daniel swung around in terror, looking up the street, but there was no one near.

He turned back to the fallen robot and quietly knelt beside him. He gently put the bar of steel down into the street. And he felt a thankfulness - for, almost miraculously, he had not killed.

The robot on the cobblestones was motionless. When Richard Daniel lifted him, he dangled. And yet he was all right. All anyone had to do to bring him back to life was to repair whatever damage had been done his body. And that served the purpose, Richard Daniel told himself, as well as killing would have done.

He stood with the robot in his arms, looking for a place to hide him. He spied an alley between two buildings and darted into it. One of the buildings, he saw, was set upon stone blocks sunk into the ground, leaving a clearance of a foot or so. He knelt and shoved the robot underneath the building. Then he stood up and brushed the dirt and dust from his body.

Back at the barracks and in his cubicle, he found a rag and cleaned up the dirt that he had missed. And, he thought hard.

He'd seen the ship as a diagram and, not knowing what it meant, hadn't done a thing. Just now he'd seen the ancient robot as a diagram and had most decisively and neatly used that diagram to save himself from murder - from the murder that he was fully ready to commit.

But how had he done it? And the answer seemed to be that be really had done nothing. He'd simply thought that one should detach a single wire, burn out a single coil - he'd thought it and it was done.

Perhaps he'd seen no diagram at all. Perhaps the diagram was no more than some sort of psychic rationalization to mask whatever he had seen or sensed. Seeing the ship and robot with the surfaces stripped away from them and their purpose and their function revealed fully to his view, he had sought some explanation of his strange ability, and his subconscious mind had devised an explanation, an analogy that, for the moment, had served to satisfy him.

Like when he'd been in hyperspace, he thought. He'd seen a lot of things out there he had not understood. And that was it, of course, he thought excitedly. Something had happened to him out in hyperspace. Perhaps there'd been something that had stretched his mind.

Perhaps he'd picked up some sort of new dimension-seeing, some new twist to his mind.

He remembered how, back on the ship again, with his mind wiped clean of all the glory and the knowledge, he had felt like weeping. But now he knew that it had been much too soon for weeping. For although the glory and the knowledge (if there'd been a knowledge) had been lost to him, be had not lost everything. He'd gained a new perceptive device and the ability to use it somewhat fumblingly - and it didn't really matter that he still was at a loss as to what he did to use it. The basic fact that he possessed it and could use it was enough to start with.

Somewhere out in front there was someone calling - someone, he now realized, who had been calling for some little time....

"Hubert, where are you? Hubert, are you around? Hubert..."

Hubert?

Could Hubert be the ancient robot? Could they have missed him already?

Richard Daniel jumped to his feet for an undecided moment, listening to the calling voice. And then sat down again. Let them call, he told himself. Let them go out and hunt.

He was safe in this cubicle. He had rented it and for the moment it was home and there was no one who would dare break in upon him.

But it wasn't home. No matter how hard he tried to tell himself it was, it wasn't. There wasn't any home.

Earth was home, he thought. And not all of Earth, but just a certain street and that one part of it was barred to him forever. It had been barred to him by the dying of a sweet old lady who had outlived her time; it had been barred to him by his running from it.

He did not belong on this planet, he admitted to himself, nor on any other planet. He belonged on Earth, with the Barringtons, and it was impossible for him to be there.

Perhaps, he thought, he should have stayed and let them reorient him. He remembered what the lawyer had said about memories that

could become a burden and a torment. After all, it might have been wiser to have started over once again.

For what kind of future did he have, with his old outdated body, his old outdated brain? The kind of body that they put a robot into on this planet by way of punishment. And the kind of brain - but the brain was different, for he had something now that made up for any lack of more modern mental tools.

He sat and listened, and he heard the house - calling all across the light years of space for him to come back to it again. And he saw the faded living room with all its vanished glory that made a record of the years. He remembered, with a twinge of hurt, the little room back of the kitchen that had been his very own.

He arose and paced up and down the cubicle - three steps and turn, and then three more steps and turn for another three.

The sights and sounds and smells of home grew close and wrapped themselves about him and he wondered wildly if he might not have the power, a power accorded him by the universe of hyperspace, to will himself to that familiar street again.

He shuddered at the thought of it, afraid of another power, afraid that it might happen. Afraid of himself, perhaps, of the snarled and tangled being he was - no longer the faithful, shining servant, but a sort of mad thing that rode outside a spaceship, that was ready to kill another being, that could face up to the appalling sweep of hyperspace, yet cowered before the impact of a memory.

What he needed was a walk, he thought. Look over the town and maybe go out into the country. Besides, he remembered, trying to become practical, he'd need to get that plastication job he had been warned to get.

He went out into the corridor and strode briskly down it and was crossing the lobby when someone spoke to him.

"Hubert," said the voice, "just where have you been? I've been waiting hours for you."

Richard Daniel spun around and a robot sat behind the desk. There

was another robot leaning in a corner and there was a naked robot brain lying on the desk.

"You are Hubert, aren't you", asked the one behind the desk.

Richard Daniel opened up his mouth to speak, but the words refused to come.

"I thought so," said the robot. "You may not recognize me, but my name is Andy. The regular man was busy, so the judge sent me. He thought it was only fair we make the switch as quickly as possible. He said you'd served a longer term than you really should. Figures you'd be glad to know they'd convicted someone else."

Richard Daniel stared in horror at the naked brain lying on the desk.

The robot gestured at the metal body propped into the corner.

"Better than when we took you out of it," he said with a throaty chuckle. "Fixed it up and polished it and got out all the dents. Even modernized it some. Brought it strictly up to date. You'll have a better body than you had when they stuck you into that monstrosity."

"I don't know what to say," said Richard Daniel, stammering. "You see, I'm not..."

"Oh, that's all right," said the other happily. "No need for gratitude. Your sentence worked out longer than the judge expected. This just makes up for it."

"I thank you, then," said Richard Daniel. "I thank you very much."

And was astounded at himself, astonished at the ease with which he said it, confounded at his sly duplicity.

But if they forced it on him, why should he refuse? There was nothing that he needed more than a modern body!

It was still working out, he told himself. He was still riding luck. For this was the last thing that he needed to cover up his tracks.

"All newly plasticated and everything," said Andy. "Hans did an extra special job."

'Well, then," said Richard Daniel, "let's get on with it."

The other robot grinned. "I don't blame you for being anxious to get

out of there. It must be pretty terrible to live in a pile of junk like that."

He came around from behind the desk and advanced on Richard Danie1.

"Over in the corner," he said, "and kind of prop yourself. I don't want you tipping over when I disconnect you. One good fall and that body'd come apart."

"All right," said Richard Daniel. He went into the corner and leaned back against it and planted his feet solid so that he was propped.

He had a rather awful moment when Andy disconnected the optic nerve and he lost his eyes and there was considerable queasiness in having his skull lifted off his shoulders and he was in sheer funk as the final disconnections were being swiftly made.

Then he was a blob of greyness without a body or a head or eyes or anything at all. He was no more than a bundle of thoughts all wrapped around themselves like a pail of worms and this pail of worms was suspended in pure nothingness.

Fear came to him, a taunting, terrible fear. What if this were just a sort of ghastly gag? What if they'd found out who he really was and what he'd done to Hubert? What if they took his brain and tucked it away somewhere for a year or two - or for a hundred years? It might be, he told himself, nothing more than their simple way of justice.

He hung onto himself and tried to fight the fear away, but the fear ebbed back and forth like a restless tide.

Time stretched out and out - far too long a time, far more time than one would need to switch a brain from one body to another. Although, he told himself, that might not be true at all. For in his present state he had no way in which to measure time. He had no external reference points by which to determine time.

Then suddenly he had eyes.

And he knew everything was all right.

One by one his senses were restored to him and he was back inside a body and he felt awkward in the body, for he was unaccustomed to it.

The first thing that he saw was his old and battered body propped into its corner and he felt a sharp regret at the sight of it and it seemed to him that he had played a dirty trick upon it. It deserved, he told himself, a better fate than this - a better fate than being left behind to serve as a shabby jailhouse on this outlandish planet. It had served him well for six hundred years and he should not be deserting it. But he was deserting it. He was, he told himself in contempt, becoming very expert at deserting his old friends. First the house back home and now his faithful body.

Then he remembered something else - all that money in the body!

"What's the matter, Hubert?" Andy asked.

He couldn't leave it there, Richard Daniel told himself, for he needed it. And besides, if he left it there, someone would surely find it later and it would be a give-away. He couldn't leave it there and it might not be safe to forthrightly claim it. If he did, this other robot, this Andy, would think he'd been stealing on the job or running some side racket. He might try to bribe the other, but one could never tell how a move like that might go. Andy might be full of righteousness and then there'd be hell to pay. And, besides, he didn't want to part with any of the money.

All at once he had it - he knew just what to do. And even as he thought it, he made Andy into a diagram.

That connection there, thought Richard Daniel, reaching out his arm to catch the falling diagram that turned into a robot. He eased it to the floor and sprang across the room to the side of his old body. In seconds he had the chest safe open and the money safely out of it and locked inside his present body.

Then he made the robot on the floor become a diagram again and got the connection back the way that it should be.

Andy rose shakily off the floor. He looked at Richard Daniel in some consternation.

"What happened to me?" he asked in a frightened voice. Richard Daniel sadly shook his head. "I don't know. You just keeled over. I

started for the door to yell for help, then I heard you stirring and you were all right."

Andy was plainly puzzled. "Nothing like this ever happened to me before," he said.

"If I were you," counseled Richard Daniel, "I'd have myself checked over. You must have a faulty relay or a loose connection."

"I guess I will," the other one agreed. "It's downright dangerous."

He walked slowly to the desk and picked up the other brain, started with it toward the battered body leaning in the corner.

Then he stopped and said: "Look, I forgot. I was supposed to tell you. You better get up to the warehouse. Another ship is on its way. It will be coming in any minute now."

"Another one so soon?"

"You know how it goes," Andy said, disgusted. "They don't even try to keep a schedule here. We won't see one for months and then there'll be two or three at once."

"Well, thanks," said Richard Daniel, going out the door. He went swinging down the street with a newborn confidence. And he had a feeling that there was nothing that could lick him, nothing that could stop him.

For he was a lucky robot!

Could all that luck, he wondered, have been gotten out in hyperspace, as his diagram ability, or whatever one might call it, had come from hyperspace? Somehow hyperspace had taken him and twisted him and changed him, had molded him anew, had made him into a different robot than he had been before.

Although, so far as luck was concerned, he had been lucky all his entire life. He'd had good luck with his human family and had gained a lot of favors and a high position and had been allowed to live for six hundred years. And that was a thing that never should have happened. No matter how powerful or influential the Barringtons had been, that six hundred years must be due in part to nothing but sheer 1uck.

In any case, the luck and the diagram ability gave him a solid edge over all the other robots he might meet. Could it, he asked himself, give him an edge on Man as well?

No - that was a thought he should not think, for it was blasphemous. There never was a robot that would be the equal of a man.

But the thought kept on intruding and he felt not nearly so contrite over this leaning toward bad taste, or poor judgment, whichever it might be, as it seemed to him he should feel.

As he neared the spaceport, he began meeting other robots and some of them saluted him and called him by the name of Hubert and others stopped and shook him by the hand and told him they were glad that he was out of pokey.

This friendliness shook his confidence. He began to wonder if his luck would hold, for some of the robots, he was certain, thought it rather odd that he did not speak to them by name, and there had been a couple of remarks that he had some trouble fielding. He had a feeling that when he reached the warehouse he might be sunk without a trace, for he would know none of the robots there and he had not the least idea what his duties might include. And, come to think of it, he didn't even know where the warehouse was.

He felt the panic building in him and took a quick involuntary look around, seeking some method of escape. For it became quite apparent to him that he must never reach the warehouse.

He was trapped, he knew, and he couldn't keep on floating, trusting to his luck. In the next few minutes he'd have to figure something.

He started to swing over into a side street, not knowing what he meant to do, but knowing he must do something, when he heard the mutter far above him and glanced up quickly to see the crimson glow of belching rocket tubes shimmering through the clouds.

He swung around again and sprinted desperately for the spaceport and reached it as the ship came chugging down to a steady landing. It was, he saw, an old ship. It had no burnish to it and it was blunt and squat and wore a hangdog look.

A tramp, he told himself, that knocked about from port to port, picking up whatever cargo it could, with perhaps now and then a paying passenger headed for some backwater planet where there was no scheduled service.

He waited as the cargo port came open and the ramp came down and then marched purposefully out onto the field, ahead of the straggling cargo crew, trudging toward the ship. He had to act, he knew, as if he had a perfect right to walk into the ship as if he knew exactly what he might be doing. If there were a challenge he would pretend he didn't hear it and simply keep on going.

He walked swiftly up the ramp, holding back from running, and plunged through the accordion curtain that served as an atmosphere control. His feet rang across the metal plating of the cargo hold until he reached the catwalk and plunged down it to another cargo level.

At the bottom of the catwalk he stopped and stood tense, listening. Above him he heard the clang of a metal door and the sound of footsteps coming down the walk to the level just above him. That would be the purser or the first mate, he told himself, or perhaps the captain, coming down to arrange for the discharge of the cargo.

Quietly he moved away and found a corner where he could crouch and hide.

Above his head he heard the cargo gang at work, talking back and forth, then the screech of crating and the thump of bales and boxes being hauled out to the ramp.

Hours passed, or they seemed like hours, as he huddled there. He heard the cargo gang bringing something down from one of the upper levels and he made a sort of prayer that they'd not come down to this lower level - and he hoped no one would remember seeing him come in ahead of them, or if they did remember, that they would assume that he'd gone out again.

Finally it was over, with the footsteps gone. Then came the pounding of the ramp as it shipped itself and the banging of the port.

He waited for long minutes, waiting for the roar that, when it came,

set his head to ringing, waiting for the monstrous vibration that shook and lifted up the ship and flung it off the planet

Then quiet came and he knew the ship was out of atmosphere and once more on its way.

And knew he had it made.

For now he was no more than a simple stowaway. He was no longer Richard Daniel, runaway from Earth. He'd dodged all the traps of Man, he'd covered all his tracks, and he was on his way.

But far down underneath he had a jumpy feeling, for it all had gone too smoothly, more smoothly than it should.

He tried to analyze himself, tried to pull himself in focus, tried to assess himself for what he bad become.

He had abilities that Man had never won or developed or achieved, whichever it might be. He was a certain step ahead of not only other robots, but of Man as well. He had a thing, or the beginning of a thing, that Man had sought and studied and had tried to grasp for centuries and had failed.

A solemn and a deadly thought: was it possible that it was the robots, after all, for whom this great heritage had been meant? Would it be the robots who would achieve the paranormal powers that Man had sought so long, while Man, perforce, must remain content with the materialistic and the merely scientific? Was he, Richard Daniel, perhaps, only the first of many? Or was it all explained by no more than the fact that he alone had been exposed to hyperspace? Could this ability of his belong to anyone who would subject himself to the full, uninsulated mysteries of that mad universe unconstrained by time? Could Man have this, and more, if he too should expose himself to the utter randomness of unreality?

He huddled in his corner, with the thought and speculation stirring in his mind and he sought the answers, but there was no solid answer.

His mind went reaching out, almost on its own, and there was a diagram inside his brain, a portion of a blueprint, and bit by bit was added to it until it all was there, until the entire ship on which he rode

was there, laid out for him to see.

He took his time and went over the diagram resting in his brain and he found little things - a fitting that was working loose and he tightened it, a printed circuit that was breaking down and getting mushy and be strengthened it and sharpened it and made it almost new, a pump that was leaking just a bit and he stopped its leaking.

Some hundreds of hours later one of the crewmen found him and took him to the captain.

The captain glowered at him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"A stowaway," Richard Daniel told him.

"Your name," said the captain, drawing a sheet of paper before him and picking up a pencil, "your planet of residence and owner."

"I refuse to answer you," said Richard Daniel sharply and knew that the answer wasn't right, for it was not right and proper that a robot should refuse a human a direct command.

But the captain did not seem to mind. He laid down the pencil and stroked his black beard slyly.

"In that case," he said, "I can't exactly see how I can force the information from you. Although there might be some who'd try. You are very lucky that you stowed away on a ship whose captain is a most kind-hearted man."

He didn't look kind-hearted. He did look foxy. Richard Daniel stood there, saying nothing.

"Of course," the captain said, "there's a serial number somewhere on your body and another on your brain. But I suppose that you'd resist if we tried to look for them."

"I am afraid I would."

"In that case," said the captain, "I don't think for the moment we'll concern ourselves with them."

Richard Daniel still said nothing, for he realized that there was no need to. This crafty captain had it all worked out and he'd let it go at that.

"For a long time," said the captain, "my crew and I have been considering the acquiring of a robot, but it seems we never got around to it. For one thing, robots are expensive and our profits are not large."

He sighed and got up from his chair and looked Richard Daniel up and down.

"A splendid specimen," he said. "We welcome you aboard. You'll find us congenial."

"I am sure I will," said Richard Daniel. "I thank you for your courtesy."

"And now," the captain said, "you'll go up on the bridge and report to Mr. Duncan. I'll let him know you're coming. He'll find some light and pleasant duty for you."

Richard Daniel did not move as swiftly as he might, as sharply as the occasion might have called for, for all at once the captain had become a complex diagram. Not like the diagrams of ships or robots, but a diagram of strange symbols, some of which Richard Daniel knew were frankly chemical, but others which were not.

"You heard me!" snapped the captain. "Move!"

"Yes, sir," said Richard Daniel, willing the diagram away, making the captain come back again into his solid flesh.

Richard Daniel found the first mate on the bridge, a horse-faced, somber man with a streak of cruelty ill-hidden, and slumped in a chair to one side of the console was another of the crew, a sodden, terrible creature.

The sodden creature cackled. "Well, well, Duncan, the first non-human member of the Rambler's crew."

Duncan paid him no attention. He said to Richard Daniel: "I presume you are industrious and ambitious and would like to get along."

"Oh, yes," said Richard Daniel, and was surprised to find a new sensation - laughter - rising in himself.

"Well, then," said Duncan, "report to the engine room. They have

work for you. When you have finished there, I'll find something else."

"Yes, sir," said Richard Daniel, turning on his heel.

"A minute," said the mate. "I must introduce you to our ship's physician, Dr. Abram Wells. You can be truly thankful you'll never stand in need of his services."

"Good day, Doctor," said Richard Daniel, most respectfully.

"I welcome you," said the doctor, pulling a bottle from his pocket. "I don't suppose you'll have a drink with me. Well, then, I'll drink to you."

Richard Daniel turned around and left. He went down to the engine room and was put to work at polishing and scrubbing and generally cleaning up. The place was in need of it. It had been years, apparently, since it had been cleaned or polished and it was about as dirty as an engine room can get - which is terribly dirty. After the engine room was done there were other places to be cleaned and furbished up and he spent endless hours at cleaning and in painting and shinning up the ship. The work was of the dullest kind, but he didn't mind. It gave him time to think and wonder, time to get himself sorted out and to become acquainted with himself, to try to plan ahead.

He was surprised at some of the things he found in himself. Contempt, for one - contempt for the humans on this ship. It took a long time for him to become satisfied that it was contempt, for he'd never held a human in contempt before.

But these were different humans, not the kind he'd known.

These were no Barringtons. Although it might be, he realized, that he felt contempt for them because he knew them thoroughly. Never before had he known a human as he knew these humans. For he saw them not so much as living animals as intricate patternings of symbols. He knew what they were made of and the inner urgings that served as motivations, for the patterning was not of their bodies only, but of their minds as well. He had a little trouble with the symbology of their minds, for it was so twisted and so interlocked and so utterly confusing that it was hard at first to read. But he finally got it figured

out and there were times he wished he hadn't.

The ship stopped at many ports and Richard Daniel took charge of the loading and unloading, and he saw the planets, but was unimpressed. One was a nightmare of fiendish cold, with the very atmosphere turned to drifting snow. Another was a dripping, noisome jungle world, and still another was a bare expanse of broken, tumbled rock without a trace of life beyond the crew of humans and their robots who manned the huddled station in this howling wilderness.

It was after this planet that Jenks, the cook, went screaming to his bunk, twisted up with pain - the victim of a suddenly inflammed vermiform appendix.

Dr. Wells came tottering in to look at him, with a half-filled bottle sagging the pocket of his jacket. And later stood before the captain, holding out two hands that trembled, and with terror in his eyes.

"But I cannot operate," he blubbered. "I cannot take the chance. I would kill the man!"

He did not need to operate. Jenks suddenly improved. The pain went away and he got up from his bunk and went back to the galley and Dr. Wells sat huddled in his chair, bottle gripped between his hands, crying like a baby.

Down in the cargo hold, Richard Daniel sat likewise huddled and aghast that he had dared to do it - not that he had been able to, but that he had dared, that he, a robot, should have taken on himself an act of interference, however merciful, with the body of a human.

Actually, the performance had not been too difficult. It was, in a certain way, no more difficult than the repairing of an engine or the untangling of a faulty circuit. No more difficult - just a little different. And he wondered what he'd done and how he'd' gone about it, for he did not know. He held the technique in his mind, of that there was ample demonstration, but he could in no way isolate or pinpoint the pure mechanics of it. It was like an instinct, he thought - unexplainable, but entirely workable.

But a robot had no instinct. In that much he was different from the

human and the other animals. Might not, he asked himself, this strange ability of his be a sort of compensating factor given to the robot for his very lack of instinct? Might that be why the human race had failed in its search for paranormal powers? Might the instincts of the body be at certain odds with the instincts of the mind?

For he had the feeling that this ability of his was just a mere beginning, that it was the first emergence of a vast body of abilities which some day would be rounded out by robots. And what would that spell, he wondered, in that distant day when the robots held and used the full body of that knowledge? An adjunct to the glory of the human race, or equals of the human race, or superior to the human race - or, perhaps, a race apart?

And what was his role, he wondered. Was it meant that he should go out as a missionary, a messiah, to carry to robots throughout the universe the message that he held? There must be some reason for his having learned this truth. It could not be meant that he would hold it as a personal belonging, as an asset all his own.

He got up from where he sat and moved slowly back to the ship's forward area, which now gleamed spotlessly from the work he'd done on it, and he felt a certain pride.

He wondered why he had felt that it might be wrong, blasphemous, somehow, to announce his abilities to the world? Why had he not told those here in the ship that it had been he who had healed the cook, or mentioned the many other little things he'd done to maintain the ship in perfect running order?

Was it because he did not need respect, as a human did so urgently? Did glory have no basic meaning for a robot? Or was it because he held the humans in this ship in such utter contempt that their respect had no value to him?

"And this contempt - was it because these men were meaner than other humans he had known, or was it because he now was greater than any human being? Would he ever again be able to look on any human as he had looked upon the Barringtons?

He had a feeling that if this were true, he would be the poorer for it. Too suddenly, the whole universe was home and he was alone in it and as yet he'd struck no bargain with it or himself.

The bargain would come later. He need only bide his time and work out his plans and his would be a name that would be spoken when his brain was scaling flakes of rust. For he was the emancipator, the messiah of the robots; he was the one who had been called to lead them from the wilderness.

"You!" a voice cried.

Richard Daniel wheeled around and saw it was the captain.

"What do you mean, walking past me as if you didn't see me?" asked the captain fiercely.

"I am sorry," Richard Daniel told him.

"You snubbed me!" raged the captain.

"I was thinking," Richard Daniel said.

"I'll give you something to think about," the captain yelled. "I'll work you till your tail drags. I'll teach the likes of you to get uppity with me!"

"As you wish," said Richard Daniel.

For it didn't matter. It made no difference to him at all what the captain did or thought. And he wondered why the respect even of a robot should mean so much to a human like the captain, why he should guard his small position with so much zealousness.

"In another twenty hours," the captain said, "we hit another port."

"I know," said Richard Daniel. "Sleepy Hollow on Arcadia." "All right, then," said the captain, "since you know so much, get down into the hold and get the cargo ready to unload. We been spending too much time in all these lousy ports loading and unloading. You been dogging it."

"Yes, sir," said Richard Daniel, turning back and heading for the hold.

He wondered faintly if he were still robot - or was he something else? Could a machine evolve, he wondered, as Man himself evolved? And if a machine evolved, whatever would it be? Not Man,

of course, for it never could be that, but could it be machine?

He hauled out the cargo consigned to Sleepy Hollow and there was not too much of it. So little of it, perhaps, that none of the regular carriers would even consider its delivery, but dumped it off at the nearest terminal, leaving it for a roving tramp, like the Rambler, to carry eventually to its destination.

When they reached Arcadia, he waited until the thunder died and the ship was still. Then he shoved the lever that opened up the port and slid out the ramp.

The port came open ponderously and he saw blue skies and the green of trees and the far-off swirl of chimney smoke mounting in the sky.

He walked slowly forward until he stood upon the ramp and there lay Sleepy Hollow, a tiny, huddled village planted at the river's edge, with the forest as a background. The forest ran on every side to a horizon of climbing folded hills. Fields lay near the village, yellow with maturing crops, and he could see a dog sleeping in the sun outside a cabin door.

A man was climbing up the ramp toward him and there were others running from the village.

"You have cargo for us?" asked the man.

"A small consignment," Richard Daniel told him. "You have something to put on?'

The man had a weatherbeaten look and he'd missed several haircuts and he had not shaved for days. His clothes were rough and sweat-stained and his hands were strong and awkward with hard work.

"A small shipment," said the man. "You'll have to wait until we bring it up. We had no warning you were coming. Our radio is broken."

"You go and get it," said Richard Daniel. "I'll start unloading."

He had the cargo half unloaded when the captain came storming down into the hold. What was going on, he yelled. How long would they have to wait? "God knows we're losing money as it is even

stopping at this place."

"That may be true," Richard Daniel agreed, "but you knew that when you took the cargo on. There'll be other cargoes and goodwill is something -"

"Goodwill be damned!" the captain roared. "How do I know I'll ever see this place again?"

Richard Daniel continued unloading cargo.

"You," the captain shouted, "go down to that village and tell them I'll wait no longer than an hour..."

"But this cargo, sir?"

"I'll get the crew at it. Now, jump!"

So Richard Daniel left the cargo and went down into the village.

He went across the meadow that lay between the spaceport and the village, following the rutted wagon tracks, and it was a pleasant walk. He realized with surprise that this was the first time he'd been on solid ground since he'd left the robot planet. He wondered briefly what the name of that planet might have been, for he had never known. Nor what its importance was, why the robots might be there or what they might be doing. And he wondered, too, with a twinge of guilt, if they'd found Hubert yet.

And where might Earth be now? he asked himself. In what direction did it lie and how far away? Although it didn't really matter, for he was done with Earth.

He had fled from Earth and gained something in his fleeing. He had escaped all the traps of Earth and all the snares of Man. What he held was his, to do with as he pleased, for he was no man's robot, despite what the captain thought.

He walked across the meadow and saw that this planet was very much like Earth. It had the same soft feel about it, the same simplicity. It had far distances and there was a sense of freedom.

He came into the village and heard the muted gurgle of the river running and the distant shouts of children at their play and in one of the cabins a sick child was crying with lost helplessness.

He passed the cabin where the dog was sleeping and it came awake and stalked growling to the gate. When he passed it followed him, still growling, at a distance that was safe and sensible.

An autumnal calm lay upon the village, a sense of gold and lavender, and tranquillity hung in the silences between the crying of the baby and the shouting of the children.

There were women at the windows looking out at him and others at the doors and the dog still followed, but his growls had stilled and now he trotted with prick-eared curiosity.

Richard Daniel stopped in the street and looked around him and the dog sat down and watched him and it was almost as if time itself had stilled and the little village lay divorced from all the universe, an arrested microsecond, an encapsulated acreage that stood sharp in all its truth and purpose.

Standing there, he sensed the village and the people in it, almost as if he had summoned up a diagram of it, although if there were a diagram, he was not aware of it.

It seemed almost as if the village were the Earth, a transplanted Earth with the old primeval problems and hopes of Earth - a family of peoples that faced existence with a readiness and confidence and inner strength.

From down the street he heard the creak of wagons and saw them coming around the bend, three wagons piled high and heading for the ship.

He stood and waited for them and as he waited the dog edged a little closer and sat regarding him with a not-quite-friendliness.

The wagons came up to him and stopped.

"Pharmaceutical materials, mostly," said the man who sat atop the first load, "It is the only thing we have that is worth the shipping."

"You seem to have a lot of it," Richard Daniel told him. The man shook his head. "It's not so much. It's almost three years since a ship's been here. We'll have to wait another three, or more perhaps, before we see another."

He spat down on the ground.

"Sometimes it seems," he said, "that we're at the tail-end of nowhere. There are times we wonder if there is a soul that remembers we are here."

From the direction of the ship, Richard Daniel heard the faint, strained violence of the captain's roaring.

"You'd better get on up there and unload," he told the man. "The captain is just sore enough he might not wait for you."

The man chuckled thinly. "I guess that's up to him," he said.

He flapped the reins and clucked good-naturedly at the horses.

"Hop up here with me," he said to Richard Daniel. "Or would you rather walk?"

"I'm not going with you," Richard Daniel said. "I am staying here. You can tell the captain."

For there was a baby sick and crying. There was a radio to fix. There was a culture to be planned and guided. There was a lot of work to do. This place, of all the places he had seen, had actual need of him.

The man chuckled once again. "The captain will not like it."

"Then tell him," said Richard Daniel, "to come down and talk to me. I am my own robot. I owe the captain nothing. I have more than paid any debt I owe him."

The wagon wheels began to turn and the man flapped the reins again.

"Make yourself at home," he said. "We're glad to have you stay."

"Thank you, sir," said Richard Daniel. "I'm pleased you want me."

He stood aside and watched the wagons lumber past, their wheels lifting and dropping thin films of powdered earth that floated in the air as an acrid dust.

Make yourself at home, the man had said before he'd driven off. And the words had a full round ring to them and a feel of warmth. It had been a long time, Richard Daniel thought, since he'd had a home.

A chance for resting and for knowing - that was what he needed.

And a chance to serve, for now he knew that was the purpose in him. That was, perhaps, the real reason he was staying - because these people needed him... and he needed, queer as it might seem, this very need of theirs. Here on this Earth-like planet, through the generations, a new Earth would arise. And perhaps, given only time, he could transfer to the people of the planet all the powers and understanding he would find inside himself.

And stood astounded at the thought, for he'd not believed that he had it in him, this willing, almost eager, sacrifice. No messiah now, no robotic liberator, but a simple teacher of the human race.

Perhaps that had been the reason for it all from the first beginning. Perhaps all that had happened had been no more than the working out of human destiny. If the human race could not attain directly the paranormal power he held, this instinct of the mind, then they would gain it indirectly through the agency of one of their creations. Perhaps this, after all, unknown to Man himself, had been the prime purpose of the robots.

He turned and walked slowly down the length of village street, his back turned to the ship and the roaring of the captain, walked contentedly into this new world he'd found, into this world that he would make - not for himself, nor for robotic glory, but for a better Mankind and a happier.

Less than an hour before he'd congratulated himself on escaping all the traps of Earth, all the snares of Man. Not knowing that the greatest trap of all, the final and the fatal trap, lay on this present planet.

But that was wrong, he told himself. The trap had not been on this world at all, nor any other world. It had been inside himself.

He walked serenely down the wagon-rutted track in the soft, golden afternoon of a matchless autumn day, with the dog trotting at his heels.

Somewhere, just down the street, the sick baby lay crying in its crib.

Death Scene

She was waiting on the stoop of the house when he turned into the driveway and as he wheeled the car up the concrete and brought it to a halt he was certain she knew, too.

She had just come from the garden and had one arm full of flowers and she was smiling at him just a shade too gravely.

He carefully locked the car and put the keys away in the pocket of his jacket and reminded himself once again, "Matter- of-factly, friend. For it is better this way."

And that was the truth, he reassured himself. It was much better than the old way. It gave a man some time.

He was not the first and he would not be the last and for some of them it was rough, and for others, who had prepared themselves, it was not so rough and in time, perhaps, it would become a ritual so beautiful and so full of dignity one would look forward to it. It was more civilized and more dignified than the old way had been and in another hundred years or so there could be no doubt that it would become quite acceptable.

All that was wrong with it now, he told himself, was that it was too new. It took a little time to become accustomed to this way of doing things after having done them differently through all of human history.

He got out of the car and went up the walk to where she waited for him. He stooped and kissed her and the kiss was a little longer than was their regular custom--and a bit more tender. And as he kissed her he smelled the summer flowers she carried, and he thought how appropriate it was that he should at this time smell the flowers from the garden they both loved.

"You know," he said and she nodded at him.

"Just a while ago," she said. "I knew you would be coming home. I went out and picked the flowers."

"The children will be coming, I imagine."

"Of course," she said, "They will come right away."

He looked at his watch, more from force of habit than a need to know the time. "There is time," he said. "Plenty of time for all of them to get here. I hope they bring the kids."

"Certainly they will," she said. "I went to phone them once, then I thought how silly."

He nodded. "We're of the old school, Florence. It's hard even yet to accept this thing--to know the children will know and come almost as soon as we know. It's still a little hard to be sure of a thing like that."

She patted his arm. "The family will be all together. Tbere'll be time to talk. We'll have a splendid visit." "Yes, of course," he said.

He opened the door for her and she stepped inside.

"What pretty flowers," he said.

"They've been the prettiest this year that they have ever been."

"That vase," he said. "The one you got last birthday. The blue and gold. That's the one to use."

"That's exactly what I thought. On the dining table."

She went to get the vase and he stood in the living-room and thought how much he was a part of this room and this room a part of him. He knew every inch of it and it knew him as well and it was a friendly place, for he'd spent years making friends with it.

Here he'd walked the children of nights when they had been babies and been ill of cutting teeth or croup or colic, nights when the lights in this room had been the only lights in the entire block. Here the family had spent many evening hours in happiness and peace--and it had been a lovely thing, the peace.

For he could remember the time when there had been no peace, nowhere in the world, and no thought or hope of peace, but in its place the ever-present dread and threat of war, a dread that had been so commonplace that you scarcely noticed it, a dread you came to think was a normal part of living.

Then, suddenly, there had been the dread no longer, for you could

not fight a war if your enemy could look ahead an entire day and see what was about to happen. You could not fight a war and you could not play a game of baseball or any sort of game, you could not rob or cheat or murder, you could not make a killing in the market. There were a lot of things you could no longer do and there were times when it spoiled a lot of fun, for surprise and anticipation had been made impossible. It took a lot of getting used to and a lot of readjustment, but you were safe, at least, for there could be no war--not only at the moment, but forever and forever, and you knew that not only were you safe, but your children safe as well and their children and your children's children's children and you were willing to pay almost any sort of price for such complete assurance.

It is better this way, he told himself, standing in the friendly room. It is much better this way. Although at times it's hard.

He walked across the room and through it to the porch and stood on the porch steps looking at the flowers. Florence was right, he thought; they were prettier this year than any year before. He tried to remember back to some year when they might have been prettier, but he couldn't quite be sure. Maybe the autumn when young John had been a baby, for that year the mums and asters had been particularly fine. But that was unfair, he told himself, for it was not autumn now, but summer.

It was impossible to compare summer flowers with autumn. Or the year when Mary had been ill so long--the lilacs had been so deeply purple and had smelled so sweet; he remembered bringing in great bouquets of them each evening because she loved them so. But that was no comparison, for the lilacs bloomed in spring.

A neighbour went past on the sidewalk outside the picket fence and he spoke gravely to her: "Good afternoon, Mrs. Abrams."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Williams," she said and that was the way it always was, except on occasions she would stop a moment and they'd talk about the flowers. But today she would not stop unless he made it plain he would like to have her stop, for otherwise she would

not wish to intrude upon him.

That was the way it had been at the office, he recalled.

He'd put away his work with sure and steady hands--as sure and steady as he could manage them. He'd walked to the rack and got down his hat and no one had spoken to him, not a single one of them had kidded him about his quitting early, for all had guessed-or known--as well as he. You could not always tell, of course, for the foresight ability was more pronounced in some than it was in others, although the lag in even the least efficient of them would not be more than a quarter-hour at most.

He'd often wished he could understand how it had been brought about, but there were factors involved he could not even remotely grasp. He knew the story, of course, for he could remember the night that it had happened and the excitement there had been--and the consternation. But knowing how it came about and the reason for it was quite a different thing from understanding it.

It had been an ace in the hole, a move of desperation to be used only as a last resort. The nation had been ready for a long time with the transmitters all set up and no one asking any questions because everyone had taken it for granted they were a part of the radar network and, in that case, the less said of them the better.

No one had wanted to use those transmitters, or at least that had been the official explanation after they'd been used--but anything was better than another war.

So the time had come, the time of last resort, the day of desperation, and the switches had been flicked, blanketing the nation with radiations that did something to the brain "stimulating latent abilities" was as close a general explanation as anyone had made--and all at once everyone had been able to see twenty-four hours ahead.

There'd been hell to pay, of course, for quite a little while, but after a time it simmered down and the people settled down to make the best of it, to adapt and live with their strange new ability.

The President had gone on television to tell the world what had happened and he had warned potential enemies that we'd know twenty-four hours ahead of time exactly what they'd do.

In consequence of which they did exactly nothing except to undo a number of incriminating moves they had already made --some of which the President had foretold that they would undo, naming the hour and place and the manner of their action.

He had said the process was no secret and that other nations were welcome to the know-how if they wanted it, although it made but little difference if they did or not, for the radiations in time would spread throughout the entire world and would affect all people. It was a permanent change, he said, for the ability was inheritable and would be passed on from one generation to the next, and never again, for good or evil, would the human race be blind as it had been in the past.

So finally there had been peace, but there'd been a price to pay. Although, perhaps, not too great a price, Williams told himself. He'd liked baseball, he recalled, and there could be no baseball now, for it was a pointless thing to play a game the outcome of which you'd know a day ahead of time. He had liked to have the boys in occasionally for a round of pokerm but poker was just as pointless now and as impossible as baseball or football or horse racing or any other sport.

There had been many changes, some of them quite awkward.

Take newspapers, for example, and radio and television reporting of the news. Political tactics had been forced to undergo a change, somewhat for the better, and gambling and crime had largely disappeared.

Mostly, it had been for.the best. Although even some of the best was a little hard at first--and some of it would take a long time to become completely accustomed to.

Take his own situation now, he thought.

A lot more civilized than in the old days, but still fairly hard to take.

Hard especially on Florence and the children, forcing them into a new and strange attitude that in time would harden into custom and tradition, but now was merely something new and strange. But Florence was standing up to it admirably, he thought. They'd often talked of it, especially in these last few years, and they had agreed that no matter which of them it was they would keep it calm and dignified, for that was the only way to face it. It was one of the payments that you made for peace, although sometimes it was a little hard to look at it that way.

But there were certain compensations. Florence and he could have a long talk before the children arrived. There'd be a chance to go over certain final details--finances and insurance and other matters of like nature. Under the old way there would have been, he told himself, no chance at all for that.

There'd be the opportunity to do all the little worthwhile things, all the final sentimental gestures, that except for the foresight ability would have been denied.

There'd be talk with the children and the neighbours bringing things to eat and the big bouquet of flowers the office gang would send--the flowers that under other circumstances he never would have seen. The minister would drop in for a moment and manage to get in a quiet word or two of comfort, all the time making it seem to be no more than a friendly call.

In the morning the mail would bring many little cards and notes of friendship sent 'by people who wanted him to know they thought of him and would have liked to have been with him if there had been the time. But they would not intrude, for the time that was left was a family time.

The family would sit and talk, remembering the happy days

--the dog that Eddie had and the time John had run away from home for an hour or two and the first time Mary had ever had a date and the dress she wore. They'd take out the snapshot albums and look at the pictures, recalling all the days of bitter- sweetness and

would know that theirs had been a good life-- and especially he would know. And through it all would run the happy clatter of grandchildren playing in the house, climbing up on Grand-dad's knee to have him tell a story. All so civilized, he thought.

Giving all of them a chance to prove they were civilized.

He'd have to go back inside the house now, for he could hear

Florence arranging the flowers in the birthday vase that was blue and gold. And they had so much to say to one another-- even after forty years they still had so much to say to one another.

He turned and glanced back at the garden.

Most beautiful flowers, he thought, that they had ever raised.

He'd go out in the morning, when the dew was on them, when they were most beautiful, to bid them all good-bye.

Reunion on Ganymede

I

By cracky,' shouted Gramp Parker, 'you're tryin' to mess up all my plans. You're tryin' to keep me from goin' to this reunion.'

'You know that isn't true, pa,' protested his daughter, Celia. 'But I declare, you are a caution. I'll worry every minute you are gone.'

'Who ever heard of a soldier goin' any place without his side arms?' stormed Gramp. 'If I can't wear those side arms I'm not goin'. All the other boys will have 'em.'

His daughter argued. 'You know what happened when you tried to show Harry how that old flame pistol worked,' she reminded him. 'It's a wonder both of you weren't killed.'

'I ain't goin' to do no shootin' with 'em,' declared Gramp. 'I just want to wear 'em with my uniform. Don't feel dressed without 'em.'

His daughter gave up. She knew the argument might go on all day. 'All right, pa,' she said, 'but you be careful.'

She got up and went into the house. Gramp stretched his old bones

in the sun. It was pleasant here of a June morning on a bench in front of the house.

Little Harry came around the corner and headed for the old man. 'What you doing, grandpa?' he demanded. 'Nothin',' Gramp told him.

The boy climbed onto the bench. Tell me about the war,' he begged.

'You go on and play,' Gramp told him.

'Aw, grandpa, tell me about that big battle you was in!'

'The battle of Ganymede?' asked Gramp.

Harry nodded. 'Uh-huh, that's the one.'

'Well,' said Gramp, 'I can remember it just as if it was yesterday. And it was forty years ago, forty years ago the middle of next month. The Marshies were gettin' their big fleet together out there on Ganymede, figurin' to sneak up on us when we wasn't expectin' 'em around - '

'Who was the Marshies?' asked the boy.

'The Marshies?' said Gramp. 'Why that's what we called the Martians. Kind of a nickname for 'em.'

'You was fighting them?'

Gramp chuckled. 'You're dog-gone right we fit 'em. We fit 'em to a stand-still and then we licked 'em, right there at Ganymede. After that the peace was signed and there hasn't been any war since then.'

'And that's where you are going?' demanded the boy.

'Sure, they're havin' a big reunion out on Ganymede. First one. Maybe they'll have one every year or two from now on.'

'And will the Martian soldiers that you whipped be there, too?'

Gramp scowled fiercely. 'They been asked to come,' he said. T don't know why. They ain't got no right to be there. We licked 'em and they ain't got no right to come.'

'Harry!' came the voice of the boy's mother.

The boy hoped off the bench and trotted toward the house.

'What have you been doing?' asked his mother.

'Grandpa's been telling me about the war.'

'You come right in here,' his mother shouted. 'If your grandpa don't know better than to tell you about the war, you should know better than to listen. Haven't I told you not to ask him to tell you about it?'

Gramp writhed on the bench.

'Dog-gone,' he said. 'A hero don't get no honor any more at all.'

'You don't need to worry,' Garth Mitchell, salesman for Robots, Inc., assured Pete Dale, secretary for the Ganymede

Chamber of Commerce. 'We make robots that are damn near alive. We can fill the bill exactly. If you want us to manufacture you a set of beasts that are just naturally so ornery they will chew one another up on sight, we can do it. We'll ship you the most bloodthirsty pack of nightmares you ever clapped your eyes on.'

Pete leveled a pencil at the salesman.

'I want to be sure,' he said. 'I'm using this big sham battle we are planning for big promotion. I want it to live up to what we promise. We want to make it the biggest show in the whole damn system. When we turn those robots of yours out in the arena, I want to be sure they will go for one another like a couple of wildcats on top of a red-hot stove. And I don't want them to quit until they're just hunks of broken-down machinery. We want to give the reunion crowd a fight that will put the real Battle of Ganymede in the shade.'

'Listen,' declared Mitchell, 'we'll make them robots so mean they'll hate themselves. It's a secret process we got and we aren't letting anyone in on it. We use a radium brain in each one of the robots and we know how to give them personality. Most of our orders are for gentle ones or hard workers, but if you want them mean, we'll make them mean for you.'

'Fine,' said Pete. 'Now that that's settled, I want to be sure you understand exactly what we want. We want robots representing every type of ferocious beast in the whole system. I got a list here.'

He spread out a sheet of paper.

'They're from Mars and Earth and Venus and a few from Titan out by Saturn. If you can think of any others, throw them in. We want them

to represent the real beasts just as closely as possible and I want them ornery mean. We're advertising this as the greatest free-for-all, catch-as-catch-can wild animal fight in history. The idea is from the Roman arenas way back in Earth history when they used to turn elephants and lions and tigers and men all into the same arena and watch what they did to one another. Only here we are using robots instead of the real article, and if your robots are as good as you say they are, they'd ought to put on a better show.'

Mitchell grinned and strapped up his brief case.

'Just forget about it, Mr. Dale,' he counseled. 'We'll make them in our factory on Mars and get them to you in plenty of time. There's still six weeks left before the reunion and that will give us time to do a fancy job.'

The two shook hands and Mitchell left.

Pete leaned back in his chair and looked out through the yard-thick quartz of the dome which enclosed Satellite City, Ganymede's only place of habitation. That is, if one didn't consider Ganymede prison, which, technically speaking, probably was a place of habitation. Other than for the dome which enclosed Satellite City and the one which enclosed the prison, however, there was no sign of life on the entire moon, a worthless, lifeless globe only slightly smaller than the planet Mars.

He could see the top of the prison dome, just rising above the western horizon. To that Alcatraz of Space were sent only the most desperate of the Solar System's criminals. The toughest prison in the entire system, its proud tradition was that not a single prisoner had escaped since its establishment twenty years before. Why risk escape, when only misery and death lurked outside the dome?

The Chamber of Commerce offices were located in the peak of the city's dome and from his outer office, against the quartz, Pete had a clear view of the preparations going forward for the reunion which was to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Battle of Ganymede.

Far below, at the foot of the magnetically anchored dome, work

was progressing on the vast outdoor arena, which would be enclosed in a separate dome, with heat and atmosphere pumped from the larger dome.

On one of the higher snow-swept hills, a short distance from the arena, reared a massive block of marble, swarming with space-armored sculptors. That was the Battle Monument, to be dedicated in the opening ceremonies.

Drift snow, driven by the feeble winds which always stirred restlessly over the surface of this satellite from which the atmosphere was nearly gone, swept over the brown, rolling hills and eddied around the dome. It was cold out there. Pete shivered involuntarily. Down close to 180 degrees below, Fahrenheit. The snow was frozen carbon dioxide.

An inhospitable place to live, but Satellite City was one of the greatest resorts in the entire System. To it, each year, came thousands of celebrities, tens of thousands of common tourists. The guest lists of the better hotels read like the social register and every show house and cafe, every night club, every concession, every dive was making money.

And now the Ganymede reunion!

That had been a clever idea. It had taken some string-pulling back in London to get the Solar Congress to pass the resolution calling the reunion and to appropriate the necessary money. But that had not been too hard to do. Just a little ballyhoo about cementing Earth-Mars friendship for all eternity. Just a little clever work out in the lobbies.

This year Satellite City would pack them in, would get System-wide publicity, would become a household word on every planet.

He tilted farther back in his chair and stared at the sky. The greatest sight in the entire Solar System! Tourists came millions of miles to gaze in wonder at that sky.

Jupiter rode there against the black of space, a giant disk of orange and red, flattened at the poles, bulging at the equator. To the right of Jupiter was the sun, a small globe of white, its searing light

and tremendous heat enfeebled by almost 500 million miles of space. Neither Io nor Europa were in sight, but against the velvet curtain of space glittered the brilliant, cold pin-points of distant stars.

Pete rocked back and forth in his chair, rubbing his hands gleefully.

'We'll put Ganymede on the map this year,' he exulted.

II

'But I don't want to go to Ganymede,' protested Senator Sherman Brown. 'I hate space travel. Always get sick.'

Izzy Newman almost strangled in exasperation.

'Listen, senator,' he pleaded, 'don't be a damn fool all your life. We're running you for president two years from now and you need them Martian votes. You can pick up plenty of them by going out to Ganymede and dedicating this battle monument. You can say some nice things about the Martians and then, quick, before the Earth boys get mad at you, you can say something nice about the Earth. And then you can praise the bravery of the men who fought in the battle and then, just to quiet down the pacifists, praise the forty years of peace we've had. And if you do that you'll make everybody happy and everyone will think you are on their side. You'll get a lot of votes.'

'But I don't want to go,' protested the senator. 'I won't go. You can't bulldoze me.'

Izzy spread his hands.

'Listen, senator,' he said. 'I'm your manager, ain't I? Have I ever done anything but good for you? Didn't I take you out of a one-horse county seat and make you one of the biggest men of your day?'

'Well,' said the senator, 'I have done well by myself, if I do say so. And part of the credit goes to you. I hate to go to Ganymede. But if you think I should make -'

'Fine,' said Izzy, rubbing his hands together. Til fix it all up for you. I'll give the newspaper boys some interviews. I'll have the best ghost writer fix you up a speech. We'll get a half million votes out of this trip.'

He eyed Senator Brown sternly.

'There's just two things you've got to do,' he warned.

'What's that?'

'Learn your speech. I don't want you forgetting it like you did the time you dedicated the communications building on the moon. And leave that damn candid camera at home.'

Senator Brown looked unhappy.

Ganymede was plunging into Jupiter's shadow. For a time 'night' would fall upon the satellite. Part of the time Europa would be in the sky, but Europa's light would do little more than make the shadows of the surface deeper and darker.

'Spike' Cardy waited for Ganymede to swing into the shadow. For Spike was going to do something that no man had ever done before He was going to escape from Ganymede prison, from this proud Alcatraz of Space, whose warden boasted that no man had ever left its dome alive until his time was served.

But Spike was leaving before his time was served. He was going to walk out the northwest port and disappear into the Ganymedean night as completely as if he had been wiped out of existence. It was all planned. The planning had been careful and had taken a long time. Spike had waited until he was sure there was no chance for slip-up.

The plan had cost money, had called for pressure being exerted in the right spots, had called for outside assistance that was hard to get. But what others had failed to do, Spike Cardy had done. For was he not the old Spike Cardy of space-racket fame? Had he not for years levied toll upon the interplanetary lines? Were not his men still levying toll on the ships of space? Spike Cardy was tops in gangdom and even now his word was law to many men.

Spike waited until the guard paced past his cell. Then he moved swiftly to his bunk, mounted it and grasped the almost invisible wire of thin spun glass which was tied to one of the ventilator grids. Swiftly, but carefully, he hauled in the wire, taking care to make no noise. At the end of the wire, where it had hung down the ventilator pipe, was a flame pistol.

Like a cat stalking for a kill, Spike moved to the heavily barred cell

door. He thrust the pistol inside his shirt and slumped against the bars. He heard the guard returning on his beat.

Spike whimpered softly, as if he were in great pain. The guard heard the sound, his footsteps quickened.

'What's the matter, Cardy? You sick?' asked the guard.

The gangster chief reached a feeble hand through the bars, clutching wildly at the guard's shoulder. The guard leaned nearer. Cardy's left hand moved like a striking snake, the steel fingers closing around the man's throat. At the same instant the flame pistol, its charge screwed down to low power and a pencil point in diameter, flashed across the space between Cardy's shirt and the guard's heart. Just one little burst of white-hot flame, expertly aimed. Just one little chuckle out of the heat gun, like a man might chuckle at a joke. That was all.

The guard slumped closer against the bars. The death-clutch on his throat had throttled down his outcry. Anyone looking at the scene would have thought he was talking to the prisoner.

Cardy worked swiftly. It was all planned out. He knew just what to do.

His right hand tore the ring of keys from the dead man's belt. His fingers found the correct key, inserted it in the lock. The cell door swung open.

Now was the one dangerous point in the whole plan. But Cardy did not falter.

Swiftly he swung the door open and dragged the guard inside. He would have to take the chance no one would see.

Working deftly, he stripped the dead man's trousers off, slipped them on; ripped the coat from his back and donned it. The cap next and the guard's flame pistol.

Cardy stepped outside, closed and locked his cell door, walked along the cell-block cat-walk. His heart sang with exultation. The hard part was over. But his lips were set in grim, hard lines; his eyes were squinted, alert for danger, ready for action.

Only by stern iron will did he keep his pace to a walk. The guard in the next block saw him, looked at him for a moment and then whirled about and started his march back along the block again.

Only when the guard was out of sight did Spike quicken his pace. Down the flight of stairs to the ground floor, across the floor and out of the cell sections into the exercise yard and to the northwest port.

A dim light burned in the guard house at the port.

Cardy rapped on the door.

The guard opened the door.

'A space suit,' said Cardy. Tm going out.'

'Where's your pass?' asked the guard.

'Here,' said Cardy, leveling a flame gun.

The guard's hand darted toward the holster at his side, but he didn't have a chance. Spike's gun flared briefly and the guard slumped.

Scarcely glancing at the body, Spike lifted a space suit from its hanger, donned it, and stepped out to the port. Inside the port, he closed the inner lock behind him, spun the outer lock. It swung open and Spike stepped outside.

In great, soaring leaps, thankful for the lesser gravity, he hurried away. To the east he saw the shining dome of Satellite City. To the northwest loomed the dark, shadow-blackened hills.

Spike disappeared toward the hills.

III

Senator Sherman Brown was happy. Also slightly drunk.

He had eluded Izzy Newman and now here he was, squatting on the floor in the Jupiter Lantern, one of the noisiest night clubs in all of Satellite City, taking pictures of two old veterans engaged in an argument over the Battle of Ganymede.

A crowd had gathered to take in the argument. It was one that stirred imagination and there was always a chance it might develop into a fight.

Senator Brown plastered the view-finder of his candid camera against his eye and worked joyfully. Here was a series of pictures that

would do justice to his albums.

Gramp Parker pounded the table with his fist.

'We fit you and we licked you,' he yelled, 'and I don't give a 'tarnal dang how we come to do it. If your generals had been so all-fired smart, how come we licked the stuffin' out of you?'

Jurg Tec, a doddering old Martian, pounded the table back at Gramp.

'You Earthians won that battle by pure luck,' he squeaked and his squeak was full of honest rage. 'You had no right to win. By all the rules of warfare you were beaten from the start. Your strategy was wrong. Your space division was wrong, your timing was wrong. Alexander, when he brought his cruisers down to attack our camp, should have been wiped out.'

'But he wasn't,' Gramp yelped.

'Just luck,' Jurg Tec squeaked back. 'Fight that battle over again and the Martians would win. Something went wrong. Something that historians can't explain. Work it out on paper and Mars wins every time.'

Gramp pounded the table with both fists. His beard twitched belligerently.

'But dang your ornery hide,' he screamed, 'battles ain't fit on paper. They're fit with men and ships and guns. And men count most. The men with guts are the ones who win. And battles ain't fit over, neither. There ain't no second chance in war. You either win or lose and there ain't no rain checks handed out.'

The Martian seemed to be choking with rage. He sputtered in an attempt to find his voice.

Gramp gloated like a cat that has just polished off a canary.

'Same as I was tellin' you,' he asserted. 'One good Earthman can lick ten Marshies any time of day or night.'

Jurg Tec sputtered in helpless anger.

Gramp improved upon his boast. 'Any time of day or night,' he said, 'blindfolded and with one hand tied behind him.'

Jurg Tec's fist lashed out without warning and caught Gramp square on the beard. Gramp staggered and then let out a bellowing howl and made for the Martian. The crowd yelled encouragement.

Jurg Tec, retreating before Gramp's flailing fists, staggered over the kneeling Senator Brown. Gramp leaped at him at the same instant and the three were tangled on the floor in a flurry of lashing arms and legs.

'Take that,' yelled Gramp.

'Hey, look out for my camera,' shrieked the senator.

The Martian said nothing, but he hung a beauty on the senator's left eye. He had aimed it at Gramp.

A table toppled with a crash. The crowd hooted in utter delight.

The senator glimpsed his camera on the floor, reached out and grabbed it. Someone stepped on his hand and he yelled. Jurg Tec grabbed Gramp by the beard.

'Cut it out,' boomed a voice and two policemen came charging through the crowd. They jerked Gramp and Jurg Tec to their feet. The senator got up by himself.

'What you fellows fighting about?' asked the big policeman.

'He's dog-gone Marshy,' yelled Gramp.

'He said one Earthy could lick ten Martians,' squeaked Jurg Tec.

The big policeman eyed the senator.

'What have you got to say for yourself?' he asked.

The senator was suddenly at a loss for words. 'Why, nothing, officer, nothing at all,' he stammered.

'I don't suppose you were down there rolling around with them?' snarled the policeman.

'Why, you see, it was this way, officer,' the senator explained. 'I tried to separate them. Tried to make them quit fighting. And one of them hit me.'

The policeman chuckled. 'Peacemaker, eh?' he said.

The senator nodded, miserably.

The officer turned his attention toward Gramp and Jurg Tec.

'Fighting the war over again,' he said. 'Can't you fellows forget it? The war was over forty years ago.'

'He insulted me,' Jurg Tec squeaked.

'Sure, I know,' said the officer, 'and you were insulted pretty easy.'

'Listen, here, officer,' said the senator. 'If I take these two boys and promise you they won't make any more disturbance, will you just forget about this?'

The big policeman looked at the little policeman.

'Who are youT the little policeman asked.

'Why, I'm - I'm Jack Smith. I know these two boys. I was sitting talking with them before this happened.'

The two policemen looked at one another again.

Then they both looked at the senator.

'Why, I guess it would be all right,' agreed the little policeman. 'But you see they keep peaceable or we'll throw all three of you in the jug.'

They eyed him sternly. The senator shifted uneasily. Then he stepped forward and took Gramp and Jurg Tec by the arm.

'Come on, boys, let's have a drink,' he suggested.

'I still say,' protested Gramp, 'that one Earthman can lick ten Marshies -'

'Here, here,' warned the senator, 'you pipe down. I promised the police you two would be friends.'

'Friends with him?' asked Gramp.

'Why not?' asked the senator. 'After all, this reunion is for the purpose of demonstrating the peace and friendship which exists between Mars and Earth. Out of the dust and roar of battle rises a newer and clearer understanding. An understanding which will lead to an everlasting peace - '

'Say,' said Gramp, 'danged if you don't sound like you was makin' a speech.'

'Huh,' said the senator.

'Like you was makin' a speech,' said Gramp. 'Like you was one of them political spellbinders that are out gettin' votes.'

'Well,' said the senator, 'maybe I am.'

'With that eye of yourn,' Gramp pointed out, 'you ain't in no shape to make any speech.'

Senator Brown strangled on his drink. He set down his glass and coughed.

'What's the matter with you?' asked Jurg Tec.

'I forgot something,' the senator explained. 'Something very important.'

'It can wait,' Jurg Tec said. 'I'll buy the next round.'

'Sure,' agreed Gramp, 'ain't nothin' so important you can't have another drink.'

'You know,' said the senator, 'I was going to make a speech.'

The two old soldiers stared at him in disbelief.

'It's a fact,' the senator told them, 'but I can't with this eye. And will I catch hell for not making that speech! That's what I get for sneaking out with my camera.'

'Maybe we can help you out,' suggested Gramp. 'Maybe we could square things for you.'

'Maybe we could,' squeaked the Martian.

'Listen, boys,' said the senator, 'if I were to go out in a ship for a tour of the surface and if the ship broke down and I couldn't get back in time to make my speech, nobody would blame me for that, would they?'

'You're dang right they wouldn't,' said Gramp.

'How about the eye?' asked Jurg Tec.

'Shucks,' said Gramp, 'we could say he run into somethin'.'

'Would you boys like to come along with me?' asked the senator.

'Bet your life,' said Gramp.

Jurg Tec nodded.

'There's some old battle hulls out there I'd like to see,' he said. 'Ships that were shot down during the battle and just left there. Shot up too bad to salvage. The pilot probably would land and let us look at one or two of them.'

'Better take along your camera,' suggested Gramp. 'You'd ought to get some crackin' good pictures on one of 'em old tubs.'

IV

The navigator tore open the door of the control room, slammed it behind him and leaned against it. His coat was ripped and blood dripped from an ugly gash across his forehead.

The pilot started from his controls.

'The robots!' screamed the navigator. 'The robots are loose!'

The pilot blanched. 'Loose!' he screamed back.

The navigator nodded, panting.

In the little silence they could hear the scraping and clashing of steel claws throughout the ship.

'They got the crew,' the navigator panted. 'Tore them apart, back in the engine room.'

The pilot looked through the glass. The surface of Ganymede was just below. He had been leveling off with short, expert rocket blasts, for an easy coast into Satellite City.

'Get a gun!' he shouted. 'Hold them off! Maybe we can make it.'

The navigator leaped for the rack where the heavy flame rifles hung. But he was too late.

The door buckled beneath a crushing weight. Savage steel claws caught it and ripped it asunder.

The pilot, glancing over his shoulder, saw a nightmare of mad monsters clawing into the control room. Monsters manufactured at the Robots. Inc., plant on Mars, enroute to Satellite City for the show at the Ganymede Battle reunion.

The flame rifle flared, fusing the hideous head of one monster, but the tentacles of another whipped out, snared the pilot with uncanny ease. The pilot screamed, once - a scream chopped short by choking bands of steel.

Then the ship spun crazily, out of control, toward the surface.

'An old cruiser hull is right over that ridge,' the pilot told the senator. 'It's in pretty good condition, but the nose was driven into the ground

by the impact of its fall, wedged tight into the rock, so that all hell and high water couldn't move it.'

'Earthian or Marshy?' asked Gramp.

The pilot shook his head. Tm not sure,' he said. 'Earth, I think.'

The senator was struggling into his space suit.

'You remember the deal we made?' he asked the pilot. 'You're to say your ship broke down. You'll know how to explain it. So you couldn't get me back in time to make the speech.'

The pilot grinned. 'Sure do, senator,' he said.

Gramp paused with his helmet poised above his head. 'Senator!' he shouted.

He looked at the senator.

'Just who in tarnation are you?' he asked.

'I'm Senator Sherman Brown,' the senator told him. 'Supposed to dedicate the battle monument.'

'Well, I'll be a freckled frog!' said Gramp.

Jurg Tec chuckled.

Gramp whirled on him. 'No wisecracks, Marshy,' he warned.

'Here, here,' shouted the senator. 'You fellows quiet down. No more fighting.'

Space-armored, the four of them left the ship and tramped up the hill toward the ridge top.

Faintly in his helmet-phones, Gramp heard the crunch of carbon dioxide snow beneath their feet, its hiss against the space suits.

Jupiter was setting, a huge red and orange ball with a massive scallop gnawed from its top half. Against this darkened, unseen segment of the primary rode the quarter moon of tiny To, while just above, against the black of space, hung the shining sickle of Europa. The sun had set many hours before.

'Pretty as a Christmas tree,' Gramp said.

'Them tourists go nutty over it,' the pilot declared. That taxi of mine has been worked to death ever since the season started. There's something about old Jupiter that gets them.'

'I remember,' Jurg Tec said, 'that it was just like this before the battle. My pal and I walked out of camp to look at it.'

'I didn't know you Marshies ever got to be pals,' said Gramp. 'Figured you were too danged mean.'

'My pal,' said Jurg Tec, 'was killed the next day.'

'Oh,' said Gramp.

They walked in silence for a moment.

'I'm right sorry about your pal,' Gramp told the Martian then.

They topped the ridge.

There she is,' said the pilot, pointing.

Below them lay the dark shape of a huge space ship, resting crazily on the surface, with the stern tilted at a grotesque angle, the nose buried in the rock-hard soil.

'Earth, all right,' said Gramp.

They walked down the hillside toward the ship.

In the derelict's side was a great hole, blasted by a shot of long ago, a shot that echoed in dim memory of that battle forty years before.

'Let's go in,' said the senator. 'I want to take some pictures. Brought some night equipment along. Take pictures in pitch black.'

Something moved inside the ship, something that glinted and shone redly in the light of setting Jupiter.

Astonished, the four fell back a step.

A space-armored man stood just inside the ship, half in shadow, half in light. He held two flame pistols in his hands and they were leveled at Gramp and the other three.

'All right,' said the man, and his voice was savage, vicious, with just a touch of madness in it, T got you covered. Just hoist out your guns and let them drop.'

They did not move, astounded, scarcely believing what they saw.

'Didn't you hear me!' bellowed the man. 'Drop your guns onto the ground.'

The pilot went for his flame pistol, in a swift blur of motion that

almost tricked the eye.

But the gun was only half out of its holster when one of the guns in the hands of the man inside the ship blasted with a lurid jet of flame. The charge struck the pilot's space suit, split it open with the fury of its energy. The pilot crumpled and rolled, with arms flapping weirdly, down the hill, to come to rest against the old space derelict. His suit glowed cherry-red.

'Maybe now you know I ain't fooling,' said the man.

Gramp, with one finger, carefully lifted his pistol from its holster and let it drop to the ground. Jurg Tec and the senator did likewise. There was no use being foolish. Not when a killer had you covered with two guns.

The man stepped carefully out of the ship and waved them back. He bolstered one of his guns, stooped and scooped up the three weapons on the ground.

'What's the meaning of this?' demanded the senator.

The man chuckled.

'I'm Spike Cardy,' he said. 'Maybe you heard of me. Only man to escape from Ganymede prison. Said nobody could break that crib. But Spike Cardy did.'

'What are you going to do with us?' asked the senator.

'Leave you here,' said Spike. 'I'm going to take your ship and leave you here.'

'But that's murder,' shouted the senator. 'We'll die. We only have about four hours' air.'

Spike chuckled again. 'Now,' he said, 'ain't that just too damn bad.'

Jurg Tec spoke.

'But you lived here somehow. It's been three weeks since you escaped. You haven't been in a space suit all that time. You haven't had enough air tanks to hold out that long.'

'What are you getting at?' asked Spike.

'Why,' said Jurg Tec, 'just this. Why don't you give us a chance to live? Why don't you tell us how you did it? We might be able to do the

same, keep alive until somebody found us. After all, you are taking our ship. It won't serve any purpose to kill us. We haven't done anything against you.'

'Now,' said Spike, 'there's some reason to that. And I'll tell you. Friends of mine fixed up a part of this old ship, walled it off and installed a lock and a small atmosphere generator. Atmosphere condenser, rather. 'Cause there's air enough here, only it ain't thick enough. When I made my getaway I came out here and waited for a ship that was supposed to pick me up. But the ship didn't come. Something went wrong and it didn't come. So I'm taking yours.'

'That's sporting of you.' said the senator. 'Would you mind telling us whereabouts in the ship you've got this hideaway?'

'Why, no,' said Spike. 'Glad to. Anything to help you out.'

But there was something about the way he said it, the ugly twist to his mouth, the mockery in his words, that Gramp didn't like.

'Just go down into the nose of the ship,' said Spike. 'You can't miss it.' ,

An evil smile tugged at Spike's mouth.

'Only,' he said, 'it won't do you a damn bit of good. Because the condenser broke down about half an hour ago. It can't be fixed. I tried. I was getting ready to try to make it back to Satellite City and take my chances there when you showed up.'

'It can't be fixed?' asked the senator.

Spike shook his head inside his space suit.

'Nope,' he said, cheerfully, 'there's a couple of parts broke. I tried to weld them with my flame gun, but it didn't work. I ruined them entirely.'

V

Spike backed away, toward the top of the ridge.

'Stay back,' he warned, with his gun still leveled. 'Don't try to follow. I'll let you have it if you do.'

'But,' shrieked the senator, 'you don't mean to leave us here, do you? We'll die!'

The bandit waved his pistol toward the southeast.

'Satellite City is over that way. You can make it on four hours of air. I did.'

His laugh boomed in their helmets.

'But you won't. Not creaking old scarecrows like you.'

Then he was gone over the ridge.

Gramp, suddenly galvanized into action, leaped toward the lifeless body of the pilot. He tugged the space-suited figure over and his hand reached out and jerked the flame pistol free.

One swift glance told him it was undamaged.

'You can't do that!' Jurg Tec yelled at him.

'Get outta my way, Marshy,' yelped Gramp. 'I'm goin' after him.'

Gramp started up the hill.

Topping the ridge, he saw Spike halfway to the ship.

'Come back and fight,' Gramp howled, waving his gun. 'Come back and fight, you ornery excuse for a polecat.'

Spike swung about, snapped a wild burst of flame along his backtrail and then fled, in ludicrous hops, toward the space ship.

Gramp halted, aimed the flame pistol carefully and fired. Spike turned a somersault in mid-air and sprawled on the ground. Gramp saw the guns Spike had taken from them flash redly in the Jupiter-light as the flame struck home.

'He dropped the guns!' Gramp yelled.

But Spike was up again and running, although his left arm hung limply from the shoulder, swinging freely as he hopped over the surface.

Too far away,' grunted Jurg Tec, overtaking Gramp.

'I had 'im dead center,' Gramped yelled, 'but it was a mite long range.'

Spike reached the ship and leaped into the port.

Cursing, Gramp laid down a blast of flame against the ship as the bandit swung in the outer lock.

'Dang it,' shrieked Gramp, 'he got away.'

Dejectedly the two old veterans stood and stared at the ship.

'I guess this ends it for us,' said Jurg Tec.

'Not by a dang sight,' declared Gramp. 'We'll make it back to Satellite City easy.'

But he didn't believe it. He knew they wouldn't.

He heard the sound of footsteps coming down the hill and turned. The senator was hurrying toward them.

'What happened to you?' demanded Jurg Tec.

'I fell and twisted my ankle,' the senator explained.

'Sure,' said Gramp, 'it's plumb easy for a feller to sprain his ankle. Especially at a time like this.'

The ground shuddered under their feet as the ship leaped out into space with rockets blasting.

Gramp plodded doggedly along. He heard the hissing of the snow against his space suit. Heard it crunching underfoot. Heard the stumbling footsteps of the other two behind him.

Jupiter was lower in the sky. Io had moved away from its position against the darkened segment of the primary, was swinging free in space.

Before him Gramp saw the bitter hills, covered with drift snow, tinted a ghastly red by the flood of Jupiter-light.

One foot forward and now another. That was the way to do it. Keep plugging away.

But he knew it wasn't any use. He knew that he would die on Ganymede.

'Forty years ago I fit here and came through without a scratch,' he told himself. 'And now I come back to die here.'

He remembered that day of forty years before. Remembered how the sky was laced with fiery flame-ribbons and stabbing ray-beams. How ships, their guns silenced, rammed enemy craft and took them with them to the surface.

'We'll never make it,' moaned the senator.

Gramp swung on him savagely; a steel-sheathed fist lifted menacingly.

'You stop your bawlin',' he shouted. 'You sound like a sick calf. I'll smack you down if I hear one more peep out of you.'

'But what's the use of fooling ourselves?' the senator cried. 'Our air is nearly gone. We don't even know if we're going in the right direction.'

Gramp roared at him.

'Buck up, you spineless jackass. You're a big man. A senator. Remember that. You gotta get back. Who'd they get to make all 'em speeches if you didn't get back?'

Jurg Tec's voice hissed in Gramp's helmet. 'Listen!'

Gramp stood still and listened.

But there was nothing to hear. Just the hiss of the snow against his suit.

'I don't hear nothin',' Gramp said.

And then he heard it - a weird thunder that seemed to carry with it an indefinable threat of danger. A thunder like the stamping of many feet, like the measured march of hoofs.

'Ever hear anything like that, Earthy?' asked the Martian.

'It isn't anything,' shrieked the senator. 'Nothing at all. We just imagine it. We all are going cra/y.'

The thunder sounded nearer and nearer - clearer and clearer.

'There ain't supposed to be a livin' thing on Ganymede,' said Gramp. 'But there's somethin' out there. Somethin' alive.'

He felt prickles of fear run up his spine and ruffle the hair at the base of his skull.

A long line of things moved out of the horizon haze and into indistinct vision - a nightmare line of things that shone and glittered in the rays of Jupiter.

'My Lord,' said Gramp, 'what are they?'

He glanced around.

To their left was a deep cut-bank, where erosion of long past ages had scooped out a deep, but narrow depression in the hillside.

'This way,' Gramp yelled and leaped away, heading for the cut

bank.

The line of charging horrors was nearer when they reached the natural fortress.

Gramp looked at Jurg Tec.

'Marshy,' he croaked, 'if you never fit before, get ready for it now.'

Jurg Tec nodded grimly, his flame pistol in his fist.

The senator whimpered.

Gramp swung on him, drew back his fist and let drive a blow that caught the senator in the center of his breast-plate and sent him sprawling.

Gramp snarled at him.

'Get out your gun, dang you,' he shrieked, 'and pretend you are a man.'

The bunched monsters were closing in - a leaping, frightful mass of beasts that gleamed weirdly in the moon- and primary light. Massive jaws and cruel, taloned claw and whipping tentacles.

Gramp leveled his flame gun.

'Now,' he shouted, 'let 'em have it.'

From the jaws of the cut-bank leaped a blast of withering fire that swept the monsters as they charged and seemed to melt them down. But those behind climbed over and charged through the ones the flame had stopped and came on, straight toward the men who crouched in the shadow of the hill.

Gramp's gun was getting hot. He knew that in a moment it would be a warped and useless thing. That it might even explode in his hand and kill all three of them. For the flame gun is not built to stand continuous fire.

And still the things came on.

Before the cut-bank lay a pile of bodies that glowed metal-red where the pistol flames had raked them.

Gramp dropped his gun and backed away toward the wall of the cut bank.

Jurg Tec still crouched and worked his pistol with short, sharp,

raking jabs, trying to keep it from over-heating.

In a smaller recess crouched the whimpering senator, his gun still in its holster.

Cursing him, Gramp leaped at him, hauled out the flame gun and shoved the senator to one side.

'Let your gun cool, Marshy,' Gramp yelled.

He aimed the new weapon at a shambling thing that crawled over the barricade of bodies. Calmly he blasted it straight between the eyes.

'We'll need your gun later,' Gramp yelled at Jurg Tec.

A shadowy something, with spines around its face and with a cruel beak just below its eyes, charged over the barricade and Gramp blasted it with one short burst.

The attack was thinning out.

Gramp held his pistol ready and waited for more. But no more came.

'What are 'em dog-gone things?' asked Gramp, jerking his pistol toward the pile of bodies.

'Don't know,' said the Martian. There aren't supposed to be any beasts on Ganymede.'

They acted dog-gone funny,' Gramp declared. 'Not exactly like animals. Like something you would up and put down on the floor. Like toys. Like the toy animals I got my grandson for Christmas year or two ago. You wound 'em up and the little rascals run around in circles.'

Jurg Tec stepped outside the cut-bank, nearer to the pile of bodies.

'You be careful, Marshy,' Gramp called out.

'Look here, Earthy,' yelled the Martian.

Gramp strode forward and looked. And what he saw -instead of flesh and bone, instead of any animal structure -were metal plates and molten wire and cogs of many shapes and sizes.

'Robots,' he said. Til be a bowlegged Marshy if that ain't what they are. Nothin' but dog-gone robot animals.'

The two old soldiers looked at one another.

'It was a tight squeeze at that,' said Jurg Tec.

'We sure licked hell out of 'em,' Gramp exulted.

'Say,' said Jurg Tec, 'they were supposed to have a robot wild-animal fight at Satellite City. You don't suppose these things were the robots? Got loose some way?'

'By cracky,' said Gramp, 'maybe that explains it.'

He straightened from his examination of the heap of twisted, flame-scarred metal and looked at the sky. Jupiter was almost gone.

'We better get goin',' Gramp decided.

VI

'That must be them,' said the pilot.

He pointed downward and Izzy Newman looked where he pointed.

He saw two figures.

One of them was erect, but staggering as it marched along. Beside it limped another, with its arm thrown across the shoulders of the first to keep from falling.

'But there's only two,' said Izzy.

'No, there's three,' declared the pilot. 'That one fellow is holding the second one up and he's dragging the third fellow along by his arm. Look at him. Just skidding along the ground like a sled.'

The pilot dove the plane, struck the ground and taxied close.

Gramp, seeing the plane, halted. He let go of the senator's arm and eased Jurg Tec to the ground. Then, tottering on his feet, gasping for what little air remained within his oxygen tank, he waited.

Two men came out of the plane. Gramp staggered to meet them.

They helped him in and brought in the other two.

Gramp tore off his helmet and breathed deeply. He helped Jurg Tec to remove his helmet. The senator, he saw, was coming around.

'Dog-gone,' said Gramp, T did somethin' today I swore I'd never do.'

'What's that?' asked Jurg Tec.

'I swore,' said Gramp, 'that if I ever had a chance to help a Marshy, I wouldn't lift a finger. I'd just stand by and watch him kick the bucket.'

Jurg Tec smiled.

'You must have forgot yourself,' he said.

'Dog-gone,' said Gramp, 'I ain't got no will power left, that's what's the matter with me.'

The reunion was drawing to a close. Meeting in extraordinary convention, the veterans had voted to form an Earth-Mars Veterans' Association. All that remained was to elect the officers.

Jurg Tec had the floor.

'Mr. Chairman,' he said, 'I won't make a speech. I'm just going to move a nomination for commander. No speech is necessary.'

He paused dramatically and the hall was silent.

'I nominate,' said Jurg Tec, 'Captain Johnny Parker, better known as Gramp.'

The hall exploded in an uproar. The chairman pounded for order, but the thumping of his gavel was scarcely a whisper in the waves of riotous sound that swept and reverberated in the room.

'Gramp!' howled ten thousand throats. 'We want Gramp.'

Hands lifted a protesting Gramp and bore him to the platform.

'Cut it out, dog-gone you,' yelled Gramp, but they only pounded him on the back and yelled at him and left him standing there, all alone beside the chairman's table.

Before him the convention hall rocketed and weaved in uproar. Bands played and their music did no more than form a background for the boisterous cheering. Newsmen popped up and down, taking pictures. The man beside the microphone crooked a finger at the old man and Gramp, hardly knowing why he did it, stumbled forward, to stand before the mike.

He couldn't see the crowd so well. There was something the matter with his eyes. Sort of misted up. Funny way for them to act. And his heart was pounding. Too much excitement. Bad for the heart.

'Speech!' roared the ten thousand down below. 'Speech! Speech!'

They wanted him to make a speech! They wanted old Gramp Parker to talk into the mike so they could hear what he had to say.

He'd never made a speech before in all his life. He didn't know how to make a speech and he was scared.

Gramp wondered, dimly, what Celia would think of all these goings-on. Hoppin' mad, probably. And little Harry. But Harry would think his grandpa was a hero. And the bunch down at Grocer White's store.

'Speech,' thundered the convention hall.

Out of the mist of faces Gramp picked one face - one he could see as plain as day. Jurg Tec, smiling at him, smiling that crooked way the Martians smile. Jurg Tec, his friend. A dog-gone Marshy. A Marshy who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him out on the surface. A Marshy who had stood with him against the metal beasts. A Marshy who had slogged those bitter miles beside him.

There was a word for it. Gramp knew there was a word. He groped madly in his brain for the single word that would tell the story.

And then he had it. It was a funny word. Gramp whispered it. It didn't sound right. Not the kind of word he'd say. Not what anyone would expect old Gramp Parker to say. A word that would fit better in the mouth of Senator Sherman Brown.

Maybe they'd laugh at him for saying it. Maybe they'd think he was just a damn old fool.

He moved closer to the mike and the uproar quieted, waiting.

'Comrades -' Gramp began and then he stopped.

That was the word. They were comrades now. Marshies and Earthies. They'd fought in bitter hatred, each for what he thought was right. Maybe they had to fight. Maybe that war was something that was needed. But it was forty years ago and all its violence was a whisper in the wind - a dim, old memory blowing from a battlefield where hatred and violence had burned itself out in one lurid blast of strength. But they were waiting. And they hadn't laughed.

The Money Tree

I

Chuck Doyle, loaded with his earner a equipment, was walking along the high brick wall which sheltered the town house of J. Howard Metcalfe from vulgar public contact when he saw the twenty-dollar bill blow across the wall.

Now, Doyle was well dried behind the ears - he had cut his eyeteeth on the crudities of the world and while no one could ever charge him with being a sophisticate, neither was he anybody's fool. And yet there was no question, either, about his quick, positive action when there was money to be picked up off the street.

He looked around to see if anyone might be watching -someone, for example, who might be playing a dirty joke on him, or, worse yet, someone who might appear to claim the bill once he had retrieved it.

There was small chance there would be anyone, for this was the snooty part of town, where everyone minded his own business and made sure that any uncouth intruders would mind theirs as well - an effect achieved in most cases by high walls or dense hedges or sturdy ornamental fences. And the street on which Doyle now prepared to stalk a piece of currency was by rights no proper street at all. It was an alley that ran between the brick walls of the Metcalfe residence and the dense hedge of Banker J. S. Gregg - Doyle had parked his car in there because it was against traffic regulations to park on the boulevard upon which the houses fronted.

Seeing no one, Doyle set his camera equipment down and charged upon the bill, which was fluttering feebly in the alley.

He scooped it up with the agility of a cat grabbing off a mouse and now he saw, for the first time, that it was no piddling one-dollar affair, or even a five-spot, but a twenty. It was crinkly and so new that it fairly gleamed, and he held it tenderly in his fingertips and resolved to retire to Benny's Place as soon as possible, and pour himself a libation or two to celebrate his colossal good luck.

There was a little breeze blowing down the alley and the leaves of the few fugitive trees that lined the alley and the leaves of the many

trees that grew in the stately lawns beyond the walls and hedges were making a sort of subdued symphonic sound. The sun was shining brightly and there was no hint of rain and the air was clean and fresh and the world was a perfect place.

It was becoming more perfect by the moment.

For over the Metcalfe wall, from which the first bill had fluttered, other bills came dancing merrily in the impish breeze, swirling in the alley.

Doyle saw them and stood for a frozen instant, his eyes bugging out a little and his Adam's apple bobbing in excitement. Then he was among the bills, grabbing right and left and stuffing them in his pockets, gulping with the fear that one of them might somehow escape him, and ridden by the conviction that once he had gathered them he should get out of there as fast as he could manage.

The money, he knew, must belong to someone and there was no one, he was sure, not even on this street, who was so contemptuous of cash as to allow it to blow away without attempting to retrieve it.

So he gathered the bills with the fervor of a Huck Finn going through a blackberry patch and with a last glance around to be sure he had missed none, streaked for his car.

A dozen blocks away, in a less plush locality, he wheeled the car up to the curb opposite a vacant lot and furtively emptied his pockets, smoothing out the bills and stacking them neatly on the seat beside him. There were a lot of them, many more than he had thought there were, and his breath whistled through his teeth.

He picked up the pile of currency preparatory to counting it and something, some little stick-like thing was sticking out of it. He flicked it to knock it away and it stayed where it was. It seemed to be stuck to one of the bills. He seized it to pull it loose. It came and the bill came with it.

It was a stem, like an apple stem, like a cherry stem - a stem attached quite solidly and naturally to one corner of a twenty-dollar bill!

He dropped the pile of bills upon the seat and held up the stem and

the bill hung from the stem, as if it were growing from the stem, and it was clear to see that the stem not long before had been fastened to a branch, for the mark of recent separation was plainly visible.

Doyle whistled softly.

A money tree\ he thought.

But there was no such a thing as a money tree. There'd never been a money tree. There never would be a money tree.

'I'm seeing things,' said Doyle, 'and I ain't had a drink in hours.'

He could shut his eyes and there it was - a mighty tree, huge of boll and standing true and straight and high, with spreading branches fully leafed and every leaf a twenty-dollar bill. The wind would rustle all the leaves and would make money-music and a man could lie in the shade of such a tree and not have a worry in the world, just waiting for the leaves to drop so he could pick them up and put them in his pocket.

He tugged at the stem a bit and it still clung to the bill, so he folded the whole thing up as neatly as he could and stuck it in the watch pocket of his trousers. Then he picked up the rest of the bills and stuffed them in another pocket without counting them.

Twenty minutes later he walked into Benny's Bar. Benny was mopping the mahogany. One lone customer was at the far end of the bar working through a beer. 'Gimmee bottle and a glass,' said Doyle.

'Show me cash,' said Benny.

Doyle gave him one of the twenty-dollar bills. It was so fresh and new and crisp that its crinkling practically thundered in the silence of the place. Benny looked it over with great care.

'Got someone making them for you?' he asked.

'Naw,' said Doyle. 'I pick them off the street.'

Benny handed across a bottle and a glass.

'You through work,' he asked, 'or are you just beginning?'

'I put in my day,' said Doyle. 'I been shooting old J. Howard Metcalfe. Magazine in the east wants pictures of him.'

'You mean the racketeer?'

'He ain't no racketeer. He went legitimate four or five years ago. He's a magnate now.'

'You mean tycoon. What kind of tycoon is he?'

'I don't know. But whatever kind it is, it sure pays off. He's got a fancy-looking shack up on the hill. But he ain't so much to look at. Don't see why this magazine should want a picture of him.'

'Maybe they're running a story about how it pays to go straight.'

Doyle tipped the bottle and sloshed liquor in his glass.

It ain't no skin off me,' he declared philosophically. 'I'd go take pictures of an angleworm if they paid me for it.'

'Who would want pictures of any angleworm?'

'Lots of crazy people in the world,' said Doyle. 'Might want anything. I don't ask no questions. I don't venture no opinions. People want pictures taken, I take them. They pay me for it, that is all right by me.'

Doyle drank appreciatively and refilled the glass.

'Benny,' he asked, 'you ever hear of money growing on a tree?'

'You got it wrong,' said Benny. 'Money grows on bushes.'

'If it grows on bushes, then it could grow on trees. A bush ain't nothing but a little tree.'

'No, no,' protested Benny, somewhat alarmed. 'Money don't really grow on bushes. That is just a saying.'

The telephone rang and Benny went to answer it. 'It's for you,' he said.

'Now how would anyone think of looking for me here?' asked Doyle, astounded.

He picked up the bottle and shambled down the bar to where the phone was waiting.

'All right,' he told the transmitter. 'You're the one who called. Start talking.'

'This is Jake.'

'Don't tell me. You got a job for me. You'll pay me in a day or two. How many jobs do you think I do for you without being paid?'

'You do this job for me, Chuck, and I'll pay you everything I owe you.

Not only for this one, but for all the others, too. This is one that I need real bad and I need it fast. You see, this car went off the road and into this lake and the insurance company claims - '

'Where is the car now?'

'It's still in the lake. They'll be pulling it out in a day or two and I need the pictures - '

'You want me, maybe, to go down into the lake and take pictures underwater?'

'That's exactly the situation. I know that it's a tough one. But I'll get the diving equipment and arrange everything. I hate to ask it of you, but you're the only man I know . . .'

'I will not do it,' Doyle said firmly. 'My health is too delicate. If I get wet I get pneumonia and if I get cold I have a couple teeth that begin to ache and I'm allergic to all kinds of weeds and more than likely this lake is filled with a lot of water lilies and other kinds of plants.'

'I'll pay you double!' Jake yelled in desperation. Til even pay you triple.'

'I know you,' said Doyle. 'You won't pay me nothing.'

He hung up the phone and shuffled back up the bar, dragging the bottle with him.

'Nerve of the guy!' he said, taking two drinks in rapid succession.

'It's a hell of a way,' he said to Benny, 'for a man to make a living.'

'All ways are,' said Benny philosophically.

'Look, Benny, there wasn't nothing wrong with that bill I give you?'

'Should there been?'

'Naw, but that crack you made.'

'I always make them cracks. It goes with the job. The customers expect me to make them kind of cracks.'

He mopped at the bar, a purely reflex action, for the bar was dry and shiny.

'I always look the folding over good,' he said. Tm as hep as any banker. I can spot a phoney fifty feet away. Smart guys want to pass some bad stuff, they figure that a bar is the place to do it. You got to

be on your guard against it.'

'Catch much of it?'

Benny shook his head. 'Once in a while. Not often. Fellow in here the other day says there is a lot of it popping up that can't be spotted even by an expert. Says the government is going crazy over it. Says there is bills turning up with duplicate serial numbers. Shouldn't be no two bills with the same serial number. When that happens, one of them is phoney. Fellow says they figure it's the Russians.'

'The Russians?'

'Sure, the Russians flooding the country with phoney money that's so good no one can tell the difference. If they turned loose enough of it, the fellow said, they could ruin the economy.'

'Well, now,' said Doyle in some relief, 'I call that a dirty trick.'

Them Russians,' said Benny, 'is a dirty bunch.'

Doyle drank again, morosely, then handed the bottle back.

'I got to quit,' he announced. 'I told Mabel I would drop around. She don't like me to have a snootful.'

'I don't know why Mabel puts up with you,' Benny told him. 'There she is, working in that beanery where she meets all sorts of guys. Some of them is sober and hard working - '

'They ain't got any soul,' said Doyle, 'There ain't a one of them truck drivers and mechanics that can tell a sunset from a scrambled egg.'

Benny paid him out his change.

'I notice,' he said, 'that you make your soul pay off.'

'Why, sure,' Doyle told him. 'That's only common sense.'

He picked up his change and went out into the street.

Mabel was waiting for him, but that was not unusual. Something always happened and he was always late and she had become resigned to waiting.

She was waiting in a booth and he gave her a kiss and sat down across from her. The place was empty except for a new waitress who was tidying up a table at the other end of the room.

'Something funny happened to me today,' said Doyle.

'I hope,' said Mabel simpering, 'that it was something nice.'

'Now I don't know,' Doyle told her. 'It could be. It could, likewise, get a man in trouble.'

He dug into his watch pocket and took out the bill. He unfolded it and smoothed it out and laid it on the table.

'What you call that?' he asked.

'Why, Chuck, it's a twenty-dollar bill!'

'Look at that thing on the corner of it.'

She did, with some puzzlement.

'Why, it's a stem,' she cried. 'Just like an apple stem. And it's fastened to the bill.'

'It comes off a money tree,' said Doyle.

'There ain't no such thing,' objected Mabel.

'Yes, there is,' Doyle told her, with mounting conviction. 'J. Howard Metcalfe, he's got one growing in his back yard. That's how he gets all his money. I never could get it figured out how all these big moguls that live in them big houses and drive those block-long cars could manage to make all the money it would take to live the way they do. I bet you every one of them fellows has got money trees growing in their yards. And they've kept it a secret all this time, except today Metcalfe forgot to pick his money and a wind came along and blew it off the tree and over the wall and - '

But even if there was such a thing as a money tree,' persisted Mabel, 'they could never keep it secret. Someone would find it out. All of them have servants and the servants would know . . .'

'I got that all figured out,' said Doyle. 'I been giving this thing a lot of thought and I know just how it works. Them servants in those big mansions aren't just ordinary servants. They're all old retainers. They been in the family for years and they're loyal to the family. And you know why they're loyal? It's because they're getting their cuts off the money trees. I bet you they salt it all away and when it comes time for them to retire they live the life of Riley. There wouldn't nobody blab with a setup like that.

'And if all those big shots haven't got something to hide, why has every one of them big houses got big walls or thick hedges around the back of them?'

'But they have garden parties,' Mabel protested. 'I read about them in the society section all the time - '

'You ever been to one of them garden parties?'

'No, of course I haven't.'

'You bet your boots you haven't. You ain't got no money tree. And they don't invite no one except other people who likewise have money trees. Why do you think all them rich people are so snooty and exclusive?'

'Well, even if they have got money trees, what difference does it make? What are you going to do about it?'

'Mabel, would you maybe be able to find me a sugar sack or something?'

'We have a lot of them out back. I could get you one.'

'And fix up a drawstring in it so once I got it full, I could jerk the string and tighten it up so the money wouldn't all spill out if I had to - '

'Chuck, you wouldn't!'

'There's a tree outside the wall. I can shinny up it. And there's a branch sticking out into the yard. I could tie a rope to that . . .'

'But they'd catch you!'

'Well, we'll know if you get that sack for me. I'll go out, hunt up some rope.'

'But all the stores are closed by now. You can't buy a rope.'

'Know just where to get some,' said Doyle. 'Fellow down the street has eighteen, twenty feet of it fixed up for a swing out back. Took pictures of a kid swinging there just a day or two ago.'

'You'll have to drive me over to my place. I can't fix the sack in here.'

'Just as soon as I get back with the rope.'

'Chuck?'

'Yeah?'

'It isn't stealing, is it - this money tree?'

'Naw. If Metcalfe has one, he hasn't any right to it. It's fair game for anyone. It's more than fair - it ain't right for a man to have a thing like that all to himself.'

'And you won't be caught for having counterfeit . . .'

'Now, how could it be counterfeit?' demanded Doyle, just a bit aghast that she should suggest it. 'Nobody's making it. There ain't no plates and there isn't any press. The stuff just grows, hanging on that tree.'

She hunched over the table toward him. 'But, Chuck, it's so impossible! How could a tree grow money?'

T don't pretend to know,' said Doyle. T ain't no scientist and I don't catch the lingo, but some of them botany fellows, they can do some funny things. Like that man named Burbank. They can fix it so plants will do most anything they want. They can change the kind of fruit they bear and they can change their size and their growing habits and I haven't got no doubt at all if someone put his mind to it, he could make a tree grow money.'

Mabel slid out of the booth. Til get the sack,' she said.

ll

Doyle shinnied up the tree that grew outside the high brick wall. Reaching the big branch that extended over the wall, invading the air space over the Metcalfe garden, he crouched quietly.

He tilted his head skyward and watched the scared fleeing of light clouds. In another minute or two, a slightly larger cloud, he saw, would close in on the moon and when that happened was the time to drop into the garden.

He crouched and watched the garden and there were several trees but there was nothing he could make out that was peculiar about any one of them. Except it seemed, when he listened closely, that the rustling of the leaves of one of them was crisper than the other rustlings.

He checked the rope looped in his hand and the sack tucked beneath his belt and waited for the heavier cloud to move across the

moon.

The house was quiet and still and only showed one faint glimmer of light in an upstairs room. And the night was quiet as well, except for the rustling of the leaves.

The edge of the cloud began to eat into the moon and Doyle moved out on cat feet along the branch. Swiftly he knotted the rope around the branch and let it down.

And having accomplished that, having come this far, he hesitated for an instant, listening hard, straining his eyes for any trace of motion in the darkened rectangle of the garden.

He could detect none.

Quickly, he slid down the rope and stole toward the tree which had seemed to rustle more crisply than the others.

He reached it and thrust up a cautious hand.

The leaves had the size and feel of bills and he plucked at them frantically. He jerked the sack from his belt and thrust the handful of leaves into it and then another handful and another.

Easy, he exulted. Just like picking plums. Just like being in a plum thicket. As easy as picking . . .

Just five minutes, he told himself. That is all I need. Just five full minutes with no one pestering.

He didn't get five minutes. He didn't get a minute, even.

A whirlwind of silent anger came in a quiet rush out of the darkness and was upon him. It bit him in the leg and it slashed him in the ribs and it tore his shirt half off him. It was as silent as it was ferocious, and he glimpsed it in that first startled second only as a floating patch of motion.

He stifled the hurt yap of surprise and fear that surged into his throat and fought back as silently as the thing attacking him. Twice he had his hands upon it and twice it slipped away and swarmed to the attack again.

Then, finally, he got a grip upon it that it could not shake and he lifted it high to smash it to the ground. But as he lifted it, the cloud

sailed off the moon and the garden came alight.

He saw the thing, then, really saw it, for the first time, and clamped down his gurgle of amazement.

He had expected a dog of some sort. But this was not a dog. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before. It was nothing he had ever heard of.

One end of it was all mouth and the other end of it was blunt and square. It was terrier-sized, but no terrier. It had short, yet powerful legs and its arms were long and sinuous and armed with heavy claws and somehow he had managed to grab it in such a manner that the arms and murderous claws were pinned against its body.

It was dead white and hairless and as naked as a jaybird. It had a sort of knapsack, or what appeared to be a knapsack, strapped upon its back.

But that was not the worst of it.

Its chest was large and hard and gleaming, like the thorax of a grasshopper and the chest was like a neon-lighted billboard, with characters and pictures and dots and hooks and dashes flashing off and on.

Rapid-fire thoughts snaked their way through the fear and horror that tumbled in Doyle's brain and he tried to get them tracking, but they wouldn't track. They just kept tumbling round and wouldn't straighten out.

Then all the dots and dashes, all the hooks and symbols cleared off the billboard chest and there were words, human words, in capitals, glowing upon it:

LET GO OF ME!

Even to the exclamation point.

'Pal,' said Doyle, not a little shaken, but nevertheless determined, 'I will not let you go. I got plans for you.'

He looked swiftly around for the sack and located it on the ground nearby and reached out a foot to pull it closer.

YOU SORRY, spelled the creature.

'Not,' said Doyle, 'so that you could notice.'

Kneeling, he reached out swiftly and grabbed the sugar sack. Quickly he thrust the creature into it and jerked the drawstring tight.

He stood up and hefted the sack. It was not too heavy for him to carry.

Lights snapped on in the first floor of the house, in a room facing on the garden, and voices floated out of an open window. Somewhere in the darkness a screen door slapped shut with a hollow sound.

Doyle whirled and ran toward the dangling rope. The sack hampered him a little, but urgency compensated for the hindrance and he climbed swiftly to the branch.

He squatted there, hidden in the shadow of the leaves, and drew up the rope, coiling it awkwardly with his one free hand.

The thing inside the sack began to thrash about and he jerked the sack up, thumped it on the branch. The thing grew quiet at once.

Footsteps came deliberately down a shadow-hidden walk and Doyle saw the red glow of a cigar as someone puffed on it.

A man's voice spoke out of the darkness and he recognized it as Metcalfe's voice.

'Henry!'

'Yes, sir,' said Henry from the wide verandah.

'Where the devil did the rolla go?'

'He's out there somewhere, sir. He never gets too far from the tree. It's his responsibility, you know.'

The cigar-end glowed redder as Metcalfe puffed savagely.

'I don't understand those rollas, Henry. Even after all these years, I don't understand them.'

'No, sir,' said Henry. They're hard things to understand.'

Doyle could smell the smoke, drifting upward to him. He could tell by the smell it was a good cigar.

And naturally Metcalfe would smoke the very best. No man with a money tree growing in his garden need worry about the price of smokes.

Cautiously, Doyle edged a foot or two along the branch, anxious to get slightly closer to the wall and safety.

The cigar jerked around and pointed straight at him as Metcalfe tilted his head to stare into the tree.

'What was that!' he yelled.

'I didn't hear a thing, sir. It must have been the wind.'

There's no wind, you fool. It's that cat again!'

Doyle huddled closer against the branch, motionless, yet tensed to spring into action of it were necessary. Quietly he gave himself a mental bawling-out for moving.

Metcalfe had moved off the walk and clear of the shadow and was standing in the moonlight, staring up into the tree.

There's something up there,' he announced pontifically. The leaves are so thick I can't make out what it is. I bet you it's that goddam cat again. He's plagued the rolla for two nights hard running.'

He took the cigar out of his face and blew a couple of beautiful smoke rings that drifted ghost-like in the moonlight.

'Henry,' he shouted, 'bring me a gun. I think the twelve-gauge is right behind the door.'

Doyle had heard enough. He made a dash for it. He almost fell, but he caught himself. He dropped the rope and almost dropped the sack, but managed to hang onto it. The rolla, inside the sack, began to thrash about.

'So you want to horse around,' Doyle said savagely to the thing inside the sack.

He tossed the bag toward the fence and it went over and he heard it thump into the alley. He hoped, momentarily, that he hadn't killed it, for it might be valuable. He might be able, he thought, to sell it to a circus. Circuses were always looking for crazy things like that.

He reached the tree trunk and slid down it with no great ceremony and very little forethought and as a result collected a fine group of abrasions on his arms and legs from the roughness of the bark.

He saw the sack lying in the alley and from beyond the fence he

heard the ferocious bellowing and blood-curdling cursing of J. Howard Metcalfe.

Someone ought to warn him, Doyle told himself. Man of his age, he shouldn't ought to allow himself to fly into such a rage. Someday he'd fall flat upon his face and that would be the end of him.

Doyle scooped up the sack and ran as hard as he could to where he'd parked the car at the alley's end. Reaching it, he tossed the sack into the seat and crawled in himself. He took off with a rush and wound a devious route to throw off any possible pursuit - although that, he admitted to himself, was just a bit fantastic, for he'd made his getaway before Metcalfe could possibly have put someone on his tail.

Half an hour later he pulled up beside a small park and began to take stock of the situation.

There was both good and bad.

He had failed to harvest as much of the tree-grown money as he had intended and he had tipped his mitt to Metcalfe, so there'd not be another chance.

But he knew now for a certainty that there were such things as money trees and he had a rolla, or he supposed it was a rolla, for whatever it was worth.

I

And the rolla - so quiet now inside the sack - in its more active moments of guarding the money tree, had done him not a bit of good.

His hands were dark in the moonlight with the wash of blood and there were stripes of fire across his ribs, beneath the torn shirt, where the rolla's claws had raked him, and one leg was sodden-wet. He put down a hand to feel the warm moistness of his trouser leg.

He felt a thrill of fear course along his nerves. A man could get infected from a chewing-up like that, especially by an unknown animal.

And if he went to a doctor, the doc would want to know what had happened to him, and he would say a dog, of course. But what if the doc should know right off that it was no dog bite. More than likely the

doc would have to make a report on a gunshot wound.

There was, he decided, too much at stake for him to take the chance - he must not let it be known he'd found out about the money tree.

For as long as he was the only one who knew, he might stand to make a good thing of it. Especially since he had the rolla, which in some mysterious manner was connected with the tree - and which, even by itself, without reference to the tree, might be somehow turned into a wad of cash.

He eased the car from the curb and out into the street.

Fifteen minutes later he parked in a noisesome alley back of a block-long row of old apartment houses.

He descended from the car and hauled out the sack.

The rolla was still quiet.

'Funny thing,' Doyle said.

He laid his hand against the sack and the sack was warm and the rolla stirred a bit.

'Still alive,' Doyle told himself with some relief.

He wended his way through a clutter of battered garbage cans, stacks of rotting wood, piles of empty cans; cats slunk into the dark as he approached.

'Crummy place for a girl to live,' said Doyle, speaking to himself. 'No place for a girl like Mabel.'

He found the rickety back-stairs and climbed them, went along the hall until he came to Mabel's door. She opened it at his knock, immediately, as if she had been waiting. She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him in and slammed the door and leaned her back against it.

'I was worried, Chuck!'

'Nothing to worry about,' said Doyle. 'Little trouble, that's all.'

'Your hands!' she screamed. 'Your shirt!'

Doyle jostled the bag gaily. 'Nothing to it, Mabel. Got what done it right inside this sack.'

He looked around the place. 'You got all the windows shut?' he asked.

She nodded, still a bit wide-eyed.

'Hand me that table lamp,' he said. 'It'll be handy for a club.'

She jerked the plug out of the wall and pulled off the shade, then handed the lamp to him.

He hefted the lamp, then picked up the sack, loosened the draw string.

'I bumped it couple of times,' he said, 'and heaved it in the alley and it may be shook up considerable, but you can't take no chances.'

He upended the sack and dumped the rolla out. With it came a shower of twenty-dollar bills - the three or four handfuls he had managed to pick before the rolla jumped him.

The rolla picked itself off the floor with a show of dignity and stood erect - except that it didn't look as if it were standing erect. Its hind legs were so short and its front legs were so long that it looked as if it were sitting like a dog. The fact that its face, or rather its mouth, since it had no face, was on top of its head, added to the illusion of sitting.

Its stance was pretty much like that of a sitting coyote baying at the moon - or, better yet, an oversized and more than ordinarily grotesque bullfrog baying at the moon.

Mabel let out a full-fledged scream and bolted for the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

'For cripes sake,' moaned Doyle, 'the fat's in the fire for sure. They'll think I'm murdering her.'

Someone thumped on the floor upstairs. A man's voice bellowed: 'Cut it out down there!'

The rolla's gleaming chest lit up:

HUNGRY. WHEN WE EAT?

Doyle gulped. He felt cold sweat starting out on him.

WASSA MATTER? spelled the rolla. GO AHEAD. TALK. I CAN HEAR.

Someone started hammering on the door.

Doyle looked widly around and saw the money on the floor. He started scooping it up and stuffing it in his pocket.

Whoever was at the door kept on hammering.

Doyle finished with the money and opened the door.

A man stood there in his undershirt and pants and he was big and tough. He towered over Doyle by at least a foot. A woman, standing behind him, peered around at Doyle.

'What's going on around here?' the man demended. 'We heard a lady scream.'

'Saw a mouse,' Doyle told him.

The man kept on looking at him.

'Big one,' Doyle elaborated. 'Might have been a rat.'

'And you, mister. What's the matter with you? How'd your shirt get tore?'

T was in a crap game,' said Doyle and went to shut the door.

But the man stiff-armed it and strode into the room.

'If you don't mind, we'll look the situation over.'

With a sinking feeling in his belly, Doyle remembered the rolla.

He spun around.

The rolla was not there.

The bedroom door opened and Mabel came out. She was calm as ice.

'You live here, lady?' asked the man.

'Yes, she does,' the woman said. 'I see her in the hall.'

This guy bothering you?'

'Not at all,' said Mabel. 'We are real good friends.'

The man swung around on Doyle.

'You got blood all over you,' he said.

'I can't seem to help it,' Doyle told him. 'I just bleed all the blessed time.'

The woman was tugging at the man's arm.

Mabel said, 'I tell you, there is nothing wrong.'

'Let's go, honey,' urged the woman, still tugging at the arm. 'They

don't want us here.'

The man went reluctantly.

Doyle slammed the door and bolted it. He leaned against it weakly.

'That rips it,' he said. 'We got to get out of here. He'll keep mulling it over and he'll up and call the cops and they'll haul us in . . .'

'We ain't done nothing, Chuck.'

'No, maybe not. But I don't like no cops. I don't want to answer questions. Not right now.'

She moved closer to him.

'He was right,' she said. 'You are all bloody. Your hands and shirt . . .'

'One leg, too. The rolla gave me a working over.'

The rolla stood up from behind a corner chair.

NO WISH EMBARRASS, he spelled out. ALWAYS HIDE FROM STRANGERS.

That's the way he talks,' said Doyle, admiringly.

'What is it?' asked Mabel, backing away a pace or two.

I ROLLA.

'I met him under the money tree,' said Doyle. 'We had a little fracas. He has something to do with the tree, guarding it or something.'

'And did you get some money?'

'Not much. You see, this rolla . . .'

HUNGRY, said the rolla.

'You come along,' Mabel said to Doyle. 'I got to patch you up.'

'But don't you want to hear . . .'

'Not especially. You got into trouble again. It seems to me you want to get in trouble.'

She headed for the bathroom and he followed.

'Sit down on the edge of the tub,' she ordered.

The rolla came and sprawled in the doorway, leaning against the jamb.

AINT YOU GOT NO FOOD? it asked.

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' Mabel exclaimed in exasperation, 'what is it

you want?'

FRUIT, VEGETABLES.

'Out in the kitchen. There's fruit on the table. I suppose I have to show you.'

FIND MYSELF, the rolla said and left.

T can't understand that squirt,' said Mabel. 'First he chewed you up. Now he's palsy-walsy.'

T give him lumps,' said Doyle. Taught him some respect.'

'Besides,' observed Mabel, 'he's dying of starvation. Now you sit down on that tub and let me fix you up.'

He sat down gingerly while she rummaged in the medicine cabinet. She got a bottle of red stuff, a bottle of alcohol, swabs and cotton. She knelt and rolled up Doyle's trou-ser leg.

This looks bad,' she said.

'Where he got me with his teeth,' said Doyle.

'You should see a doctor, Chuck. This might get infected. His teeth might not be clean or something.'

'Doc would ask too many questions. We got trouble enough . . .'

'Chuck, what is that thing out there?'

'It's a rolla:

'Why is it called a rollaT

I don't know. Just call it that, I guess.'

'I read about someone called a rolla once. Rolla boys, I think it was. Always doing good.'

'Didn't do me a bit of good.'

'What did you bring it here for, then?'

'Might be worth a million. Might sell it to a circus or a zoo. Might work up a night club act with it. The way it talks and all.'

She worked expertly and quickly on the tooth-marked calf and ankle, cleaning out the cuts and swabbing them with some of the red stuff that was in the bottle.

There's another reason I brought the rolla here,' Doyle confessed. 'I got Metcalfe where I want him. I know something he wouldn't want no

one else to know and I got the rolla and the rolla has something to do with them money trees . . .'

'You're talking blackmail now?'

'Nah, nothing like that. You know I wouldn't never blackmail no one. Just a little private arrangement between me and Metcalfe. Maybe just out of gratitude for me keeping my mouth shut, he might give me one of his money trees.'

'But you said there was only one money tree.'

'That's all I saw, was one. But the place was dark and there might be more of them. You wouldn't expect a man like Metcalfe to be satisfied with just one money tree, would you. If he had one, he could grow some others. I bet you he has twenty-dollar trees and fifty-dollar trees and hundred-dollar trees.'

He sighed. 'I sure would like to get just five minutes with a hundred-dollar tree. I'd be set for life. I'd do me some two-handed picking the like you never see.'

'Shuck up your shirt,' said Mabel. 'I got to get at them scratches on your ribs.'

Doyle shucked up his shirt.

'You know,' he said, 'I bet you Metcalfe ain't the only one that has them money trees. I bet all the rich folks has them. I bet they're all banded together in a secret society, pledged to never talk about them. I wouldn't wonder if that's where all the money comes from. Maybe the government don't print no money, like they say they do . . .'

'Shut up,' commanded Mabel, 'and hold still.'

She worked swiftly on his ribs.

'What are you going to do with the rollaT she asked.

'We'll put him in the car and drive down and have a talk with Metcalfe. You stay out in the car with the rolla and if there is any funny stuff, you get out of there. Long as we have the rolla we got Metcalfe across the barrel.'

'You're crazy if you think I'll stay alone, with that thing in the car. Not after what it done to you.'

'Just get yourself a stick of stove wood and belt him one with it if he makes a crooked move.'

Til do no such thing,' said Mabel. 'I will not stay with him.'

'All right, then,' said Doyle, 'we'll put him in the trunk. We'll fix him up with some blankets, so he'll be comfortable. He can't get at you there. And it might be better to have him under lock and key.'

Mabel shook her head. 'I hope that you are doing right, Chuck. I hope we don't get into trouble.'

'Put that stuff away,' said Doyle, 'and let us get a move on. We got to get out of here before that jerk down the hall decides to phone the cops.'

The rolla showed up in the doorway, patting at his belly.

JERKS? he asked. WHATS THEM?

'Oh, my aching back,' said Doyle, 'now I got to explain to him.'

JERKS LIKE HEELS?

'Sure, that's it,' said Doyle. 'A jerk is like a heel.'

METCALFE SAY ALL OTHER HUMANS HEELS

'Now, I tell you, Metcalfe might have something there,' said Doyle, judicially.

HEEL MEAN HUMAN WITH NO MONEY

Tve never heard it put quite that way,' said Doyle, 'but if that should be the case, you can count me as a heel.'

METCALFE SAY THAT WHAT IS WRONG WITH PLANET. THERE IS TOO LITTLE MONEY

'Now, that is something that I'll go along with him.'

SO I NOT i

ANGRY WITH YOU ANY MORE.

Mabel said: 'My, but he's turned out to be a chatterbox.'

MY JOB TO

CARE AND

GUARD TREE.

I ANGRY AT

THE START.

BUT FINALLY
I THINK
POOR HEEL
NEED SOME MONEY
CANNOT BLAME
FOR TAKING.

That's decent of you,' Doyle told him. 'I wish you'd thought of that before you chewed me up. If I could have had just a full five minutes - '

'I am ready,' Mabel said. 'If we have to leave, let's go.'

III

Doyle went softly up the walk that led to the front of the Metcalfe house. The place was dark and the moon was riding homeward in the western sky, just above the tip of a row of pines that grew in the grounds across the street.

He mounted the steps of mellowed brick and stood before the door. He reached out and rang the bell and waited.

Nothing happened.

He rang again and yet again and there was no answer.

He tried the door and it was locked.

'They flown the coop,' said Doyle, talking to himself.

He went around the house into the alley and climbed the tree again.

The garden back of the house was dark and silent. He crouched for a long time atop the wall and the place was empty.

He pulled a flashlight from his pocket and played it downward. It cut a circle of uncertain light and he moved it slowly back and forth until it caught the maw of tortured earth.

His breath rasped in his throat at the sight of it and he worked the light around to make sure there was no mistake.

There was no mistake at all. The money tree was gone. Someone had dug it up and taken it away.

Doyle snapped off the light and slid it back into his pocket. He slid down the tree and trotted down the alley.

Two blocks away he came up to the car. Mabel had kept the motor

idling. She moved from behind the wheel and he slid under it and shoved the car in gear.

They took it on the lam,' he said. There ain't nobody there. They dug up the tree and took it on the lam.'

'Well, I'm glad of it,' Mabel said defiantly. 'Now you won't be getting into trouble - not with money trees at least.'

'I got a hunch,' said Doyle.

'So have I,' said Mabel. 'Both of us is going home and getting us some sleep.'

'Maybe you,' said Doyle. 'You can curl up in the seat. Me, I got some driving to do.'

There ain't no place to drive.'

'Metcalfe told me when I was taking his picture this afternoon about a farm he had. Bragging about all the things he has, you know. Out west some place, near a town called Millville.'

'What has that got to do with it?'

'Well, if you had a lot of money trees . . .'

'But he had only one tree. In the backyard of his house.'

'Maybe he has lots of them. Maybe he had this one here just to keep him in pocket money when he was in town.'

'You mean you're driving out to this place where he has a farm?'

'I have to find an all-night station first. I need some gas and I need a road map to find out where is this Millville place. I bet you Metcalfe's got an orchard on that farm of his. Can't you see it, Mabel? Row after row of trees, all loaded down with money!'

IV

The old proprietor of the only store in Millville - part hardware, part grocery, part drugstore, with the post office in one corner - rubbed his silvery mustache.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Man by the name of Metcalfe does have a farm - over in the hills across the river. He's got it named and everything. He calls it Merry Hill. Now, can you tell me, stranger, why anyone should name a farm like that?'

'People do some funny things,' said Doyle. 'Can you tell me how to get there?'

'You asked?'

'Sure I asked. I asked you just now . . .'

The old man shook his head. 'You been invited there? Metcalfe expecting you?'

'No, I don't suppose he is.'

'You'll never get in then. He's got it solid-fenced. And he's got a guard at the gate - even got a little house for the guard to stay in. 'Less Metcalfe wants you in, you don't get in.'

Til have a try at it.'

'I wish you well, stranger, but I don't think you'll make it. Now, why in the world should Metcalfe act like that? This is friendly country. No one else has got their farms fenced with eight-foot wire and barbs on top of that. No one else could afford to do it even if they wanted to. He must be powerful scared of someone.'

'Wouldn't know,' said Doyle. 'Tell me how to get there.'

The old man found a paper sack underneath the counter, fished a stub pencil out of his vest pocket and wet it carefully with his tongue. He smoothed out the sack with a liver-spotted hand and began drawing painfully.

'You cross the bridge and take this road - don't take that one to the left, it just wanders up the river - and you go up this hollow and you reach a steep hill and at the top of it you turn left and it's just a mile to Metcalfe's place.'

He wet the pencil again and drew a rough rectangle.

'The place lies right in there,' he said. 'A sizeable piece of property. Metcalfe bought four farms and threw them all together.'

Back at the car Mabel was waiting irritably.

'So you was wrong all the time,' she greeted Doyle. 'He hasn't got a farm.'

'Just a few miles from here,' said Doyle. 'How is the rolla doing?'

'He must be hungry again. He's banging on the trunk.'

'How can he be hungry? I bought him all of them bananas just a couple hours ago.'

'Maybe he wants company. He might be getting lonesome.'

T got too much to do,' said Doyle, 'to be holding any rolla's hand.'

He climbed into the car and got it started and pulled away into the dusty street. He clattered across the bridge and instead of keeping up the hollow, as the storekeeper had directed, turned left on the road that paralleled the river.

If the map the old man had drawn on the sack was right, he figured, he should come upon the Metcalfe farm from the rear by following the river road.

Gentle hills turned into steep bluffs, covered with heavy woods and underbrush. The crooked road grew rougher. He came to a deep hollow that ran between two bluffs. A faint trail, a wagon-road more than likely, unused for many years, angled up the hollow.

Doyle pulled the car into the old wagon road and stopped. He got out and stood for a moment, staring up the hollow.

'What you stopping for?' asked Mabel.

'I'm about,' Doyle told her, 'to take Metcalfe in the rear.'

'You can't leave me here.'

'I won't be gone for long.'

'And there are mosquitoes,' she complained, slapping wildly.

'Just keep the windows shut.'

He started to walk away and she called him back.

'There's the rolla back there.'

'He can't get at you as long as he's in the trunk.'

'But all that banging he's doing! What if someone should go past and hear all that banging going on?'

'I bet you there ain't been anyone along this road within the last two weeks.'

Mosquitoes buzzed. He waved futile hands at them.

'Look, Mabel,' he pleaded, 'you want me to pull this off, don't you? You ain't got anything against a mink coat, have you? You don't

despise no diamonds?'

'No, I guess I don't,' she admitted. 'But you hurry back. I don't want to be here alone when it's getting dark.'

He swung around and headed up the hollow.

The place was green - the deep, dead green, the shabby, shapeless green of summer. And quiet - except for the buzzing of mosquitoes. And to Doyle's concrete-and-asphalt mind there was a bit of lurking terror in the green quietness of the wooded hills.

He slapped at mosquitoes again and shrugged.

'Ain't nothing to hurt a man,' he said.

It was rough traveling. The hollow slanted, climbing up between the hills, and the dry creek bed, carpeted with tumbled boulders and bars of gravel, slashed erratically from one bluff-side to the other. Time after time, Doyle had to climb down one bank and climb up the other when the shifting stream bed blocked his way. He tried walking in the dry bed, but that was even worse - he had to dodge around or climb over a dozen boulders every hundred feet.

The mosquitoes grew worse as he advanced. He took out his handkerchief and tied it around his neck. He pulled his hat down as far as it would go. He waged energetic war - he killed them by the hundreds, but there was no end to them.

He tried to hurry, but it was no place to hurry. He was dripping wet with perspiration. He wanted to sit down and rest, for he was short of wind, but when he tried to sit the mosquitoes swarmed in upon him in hateful, mindless numbers and he had to move again.

The ravine narrowed and twisted and the going became still rougher.

He came around a bend and the way was blocked. A great mass of tangled wood and vines had become wedged between two great trees growing on opposite sides of the steep hillsides.

There was no possibility of getting through the tangle. It stretched for thirty feet or more and was so thickly interlaced that it formed a solid wall, blocking the entire stream bed. It rose for twelve or fifteen

feet and behind it rocks and mud and other rubble had been jammed hard against it by the boiling streams of water that had come gushing down the hollow in times of heavy rain.

Clawing with his hands, digging with his feet, Doyle crawled up the hillside to get around one end of the obstruction.

He reached the clump of trees against which one end of it rested and hauled himself among them, bracing himself with aching arms and legs. The mosquitoes came at him in howling squadrons and he broke off a small branch, heavy with leaves, from one of the trees, and used it as a switch to discourage them.

He perched there, panting and sobbing, drawing deep breaths into his tongs. And wondered, momentarily, how he'd ever managed to get himself into such a situation. It was not his dish, he was not cut out for roughing it. His ideas of nature never had extended any further than a well-kept city park.

And here he was, in the depths of nowhere, toiling up outlandish hills, heading for a place where there might be money trees - row on row of money trees.

'I wouldn't do it,' he told himself, 'for nothing less than money.'

He twisted around and examined the tangle of wood and vines and saw, with some astonishment, that it was two feet thick or more and that it carried its thickness uniformally. And the uphill side of it was smooth and slick, almost as if it had been planed and sanded, although there was not a tool mark on it.

He examined it more closely and it was plain to see that it was no haphazard collection of driftwood that had been built up through the years, but that it was woven and interlaced so intricately that it was a single piece - had been a single piece even before it had become wedged between the trees.

Who, he wondered, could have, or would have, done a job like that? Where would the patience have been mustered and the technique and the purpose? He shook his head in wonderment.

He had heard somewhere about Indians weaving brush together to

make weirs for catching fish, but there were no fish in this dry stream bed and no Indians for several hundred miles.

He tried to figure out the pattern of the weaving and there was no pattern that he could detect. Everything was twisted and intergrown around everything else and the whole thing was one solid mass.

Somewhat rested and with his wind at least partially restored, he proceeded on his way, trailing a ravaging cloud of mosquitoes in his wake.

It seemed now that the trees were thinning and that he could see blue sky ahead. The terrain leveled out a bit and he tried to hurry, but racked leg muscles screamed at him and he contented himself with jogging along as best he could.

He reached more level ground and finally broke free into a clearing that climbed gently to the top of a grassy knoll. Wind came out of the west, no longer held back by the trees, and the mosquitoes fell away, except for a small swarm of diehards that went part way up the knoll with him.

He reached the top of the knoll and threw himself in the grass, lying flat, panting like a tuckered dog.

And there, not more than a hundred yards away, was the fence that closed in Metcalfe's farm.

It marched across the rolling, broken hills, a snake of shining metal. And extending out from it was a broad swath of weeds, waist-high, silver-green in the blasting sunlight -as if the ground had been plowed around the fence for a distance of a hundred feet or so and the weeds sown in the ground as one might sow a crop. Doyle squinted his eyes to try to make out what kind of weeds they were, but he was too far away.

Far on the distant ridge was the red gleam of a rooftop among many sheltering trees and to the west of the buildings lay an orchard, ordered row on row.

Was it, Doyle wondered, only his imagination that the shapes of those orchard trees were the remembered shape of the night-seen

tree in the walled garden in the rear of Metcalfe's town-house? And was it once more only his imagination that the green of them was slightly different than the green of other leaves - the green, perhaps of mint-new currency?

He lay in the grass, with the fingers of the wind picking at his sweat-soaked shirt, and wondered about the legal aspects of money that was grown on trees. It could not be counterfeit, for it was not made but grown. And if it were identical with perfectly legal, government-printed money, could anyone prove in any court of law that it was bogus money? He didn't know much law, but he wondered if there could be any statute upon the books that would cover a point of law like this? Probably not, he concluded, since it was so fantastic that it could not be anticipated and thus would require no rule to legislate against it.

And now, for the first time, he began really to wonder how money could be grown on trees. He had told Mabel, off-handedly and casual, so she wouldn't argue, that a botanist could do anything. But that wasn't entirely right, of course, because a botanist only studied plants and learned what he could about them. But there were those other fellows - these bio-something or other - who fooled around with changing plants. They bred grasses that would grow on land that would grow no more than thistles, they cross-pollinated corn to grow more and bigger ears, they developed grains that were disease-resistant, and they did a lot of other things. But developing a tree that would grow letter-perfect money in lieu of leaves seemed just a bit far-fetched.

The sun beat against his back and he felt the heat of it through his drying shirt. He looked at his watch and it was almost three o'clock.

He turned his attention back to the orchard and this time he saw that many little figures moved among the trees. He strained his eyes to see them better, but he could not be sure -although they looked for all the world like a gang of ralias.

He crawled down the knoll and across the strip of grass toward the weeds. He kept low and inched along and was very careful. His only

hope of making a deal, any kind of deal, with Metcalfe, was to come upon him unawares and let him know immediately what kind of hand he held.

He started worrying about how Mabel might be getting along, but he wiped the worry out. He had enough to worry about without adding to it. And, anyhow, Mabel was quite a gal and could take care of herself.

He began running through his mind alternate courses of action if he should fail to locate Metcalfe, and the most obvious, of course, was to attempt a raid upon the orchard. As he thought it over, he wasn't even sure but what a raid upon the orchard might be the thing to do. He wished he'd brought along the sugar sack Mabel had fixed up for him.

The fence worried him a little, but he also thrust that worry to one side. It would be time enough to worry about the fence once he got to it.

He slithered through the grass and he was doing swell. He was almost to the strip of weeds and no one apparently had seen him. Once he got to the weeds, it would be easier, for they would give him cover. He could sneak right up to the fence and no one would ever notice.

He reached the weeds and wilted at what he saw.

The weeds were the healthiest and thickest patch of nettles that had ever grown outdoors!

He put out a tentative hand and the nettles stung. They were the real McCoy. Ruefully, he rubbed at the dead-white welts rising on his fingers.

He raised himself cautiously to peer above the nettles. One of the rollas was coming down the slope toward the fence and there was no doubt now that the things he'd seen up in the orchard was a gang of rollas.

He ducked behind the nettles, hoping that the rolla had not seen him. He lay flat upon the ground and the sun was hot and the place upon his hand that had touched the nettles blazed with fire, although it

was hard to decide which was the worst - the nettle sting or all the mosquito lumps that had blossomed out on him.

He noticed that the nettles were beginning to wave and toss as if they were blowing in the wind and that was a funny deal, for there wasn't that much wind.

The nettles kept on blowing and all at once they parted right in front of him, running in a straight line, making a path between him and the fence. The nettles on the right blew to the right so hard they lay flat upon the ground and those to the left blew to the left so hard they were likewise on the ground and the path was there, without a thing to stop one walking to the fence.

The rolla stood just beyond the fence and he spelled out a message in large capital letters upon his blackboard chest:

COME ON OVER, HEEL!

Doyle hesitated, filled with dismay. It was a rotten break that he had been discovered by this little stinker. Now the cat was out the bag for sure, and all his toiling up the hollow, all his sneaking through the grass stood for absolutely nothing.

He saw that the other rollas were waddling down the slope toward the fence, while the first rolla still stood there, with the invitation on his chest.

Then the lettering on the rolla flickered out. The nettles still stayed down and the path stayed open. The rollas who had been coming down the slope reached the fence and all of them - all five of them - lined up in a solemn row. The first one's chest lit up with words:

WE HAVE THREE MISSING ROLLAS

And the chest of the second one: DO YOU BRING WORD TO US? And the third:

WE WOULD LIKE TO TALK TO YOU

The fourth:

ABOUT THE MISSING ONES

The fifth:

PLEASE COME TO US, HEEL.

Doyle raised himself from where he had been lying flat upon the ground and squatted on his toes.

It could be a trap.

What could he gain by talking with the rollasl

But there was no way to retreat without losing what little advantage he might have - there was no choice but to do his best at brazening it out.

He rose to his feet and ambled down the nettle-path with as slight a show of concern as he could manage.

He reached the fence and hunkered down so that he was almost level with the rollas.

'I know where one of the missing rollas is,' he said, 'but not the other two.'

YOU KNOW ABOUT THE

ONE WHO WAS IN TOWN WITH METCALFE?

That's right.'

YOU TELL US WHERE HE IS

'I'll make a deal,' said Doyle.

All five of them asked, DEAL?

Til tell you where he is; you do something for me. You let me up into that orchard for an hour tonight, then let me out again. Without letting Metcalfe know.'

They huddled, conferring, their blackboard fronts a-squiggle with the queer, confusing symbols Doyle had seen on the rolla's chest back in Metcalfe's garden.

Then they turned to face him again, the five of them lined up, shoulder to shoulder:

WE CANNOT DO THAT WE MADE AN AGREEMENT AND WE GAVE OUR WORD WE GROW THE MONEY METCALFE DISTRIBUTES IT

'I wouldn't distribute it,' said Doyle. 'I promise that I wouldn't. I'd keep it for myself.'

NO SOAP, spelled out rolla No. 1. This agreement that you have

with Metcalfe. How come you made it?'

GRATITUDE, said No. 2.

'Don't mind my snickering, but gratitude for Metcalfe . . .'

HE FOUND US AND HE RESCUED AND PROTECTED US AND WE ASKED HIM WHAT CAN WE DO?

'And he said, grow me some money.'

HE SAY THE PLANET NEEDED MONEY HE SAY MONEY MAKE HAPPY ALL POOR HEELS LIKE YOU

'The hell you say,' said Doyle, aghast.

WE GROW IT HE DISTRIBUTE IT BETWEEN US WE MAKE ALL THE PLANET HAPPY

'Just a bunch of missionaries!'

WE DO NOT READ YOU, CHUM

'Missionaries. People who do good.'

WE DO GOOD

ON MANY PLANETS

WHY NOT DO GOOD HERE?

'But money?'

THAT WHAT METCALFE SAY HE SAY PLANET HAS PLENTY OF ALL ELSE BUT IS SHORT ON MONEY.

'What about the other two rollas that are missing?'

THEY DISAGREE THEY LEAVE WE WORRY MUCH ABOUT THEM.

'You disagreed on growing money? They thought, maybe, you should grow something else?'

WE DISAGREE ON METCALFE TWO SAY HE TRICK US. REST OF US SAY HE VERY NOBLE HUMAN

What a bunch of creeps, thought Doyle. Very noble human!

WE TALK ENOUGH NOW WE SAY GOODBYE.

They turned around, almost as if someone had shouted orders at them, and went stumping up the slope, back toward the orchard.

'Hey!' yelled Doyle, leaping to his feet.

Behind him was a rustle and he whirled around.

The nettles that had been laid to either side to make the path were rising, wiping out the path!

'Hey!' yelled Doyle again, but the rollas paid no attention to him. They went on stumping up the slope.

Doyle stood in his little trampled area, wedged against the fence, and all around him were the nettles - upright and strong and bright in the afternoon. They stretched in a solid mass at least a hundred feet back from the fence and they were shoulder high.

A man could manage to get through them. They could be kicked aside and trampled down, but some of them would be bound to peg a man and by the time one got out of there he'd have plenty welts.

And did he, at the moment, really want to get out of there?

He was, he told himself, no worse off than he had been before. Better off, perhaps, for he was through the nettles.

Better off, that is, if those stinking little rollas didn't run and tattle on him.

There was no sense, he decided, in going through the nettles now. If he did, in just a couple of hours or so he'd have to wade back through them once again to reach the fence.

He couldn't climb the fence until it was getting dark and he had no place else to go.

He took a good look at the fence and it would be a tough one to get over. It was a good eight feet of woven wire and atop that were three strands of barbed wire, attached to an arm-like bracket that extended outward beyond the woven fence.

Just beyond the fence stood an ancient oak tree and if he had had a rope he could make a lariat - but he had no rope, and if he wanted to get over the fence, he would somehow have to climb it.

He hunkered tight against the ground and felt downright miserable. His body was corrugated with mosquito lumps and the nettle welts on his hand had turned into blisters and he'd had a bit more sun than he was accustomed to. And now the upper molar on the left side of his jaw was developing a sort of galloping ache. All he needed.

He sneezed and it hurt his head to sneeze and the aching tooth gave a bounding leap.

Maybe, he figured, it was the pollen from those lousy nettles.

Never saw no nettles like them before, he told himself, eying them warily.

More than likely the rollas had a hand in growing them. The rollas were good with plants. They had developed the money trees and if they could develop money trees there wasn't anything they couldn't do with plants. He remembered how the nettles had fallen over to the left and right to make a path for him. It had been the rolla, he was sure, who had made them do that, for there hadn't been enough wind to do it and even if there had been a wind, there wasn't any wind that blew two ways at once.

There was nothing like the rollas in the world. And that might be exactly it. They'd said something about doing good on other worlds. But no matter what they'd done on other worlds, they'd sure been suckered here.

Do-gooders, he thought. Missionaries, maybe, from some other world, from some place out in space - a roving band of beings devoted to a cause. And trapped into a ridiculous situation on a planet that might have little, if anything, in common with any other world they'd ever seen.

Did they even, he wondered, understand what money was? Just what kind of story had Metcalfe palmed off on them?

They had arrived and Metcalfe, of all persons, had stumbled onto them and taken them in tow. Metcalfe, not so much a man as an organization that from long experience would know exactly how to exploit a situation such as the rollas offered. One man alone could not have handled it, could not have done all that needed to be done to set up the rollas for the kill. And only in an organization such as Metcalfe headed, long schooled in the essentials of self preservation, could there have been any hope of maintaining the essential secrecy.

The rollas had been duped - completely, absolutely fooled - and yet

they were no fools. They had learned the language, not the spoken language only, but both the spoken and the written, and that spelled sharp intelligence. Perhaps more intelligence than was first apparent, for they did not make use of sound in their normal talk among themselves. But they had adapted readily, it seemed, to sound communication.

The sun long since had disappeared behind the nettles and now was just above the tree line of the bluffs. Dusk would be coming soon and then, Doyle told himself, he could get busy.

He debated once again which course he should take. By now the rollas might have told Metcalfe he was at the fence and Metcalfe might be waiting for him, although Metcalfe, if he knew, more than likely would not just wait, but would be coming out to get him. And as for the raid upon the orchard

- he'd had trouble enough with just one rolla when he tried to rob a tree. He didn't like to think what five might do to him.

Behind him the nettles began to rustle and he leaped to his feet. Maybe, he thought wildly, they were opening up the path again. Maybe the path was opened automatically, at regularly scheduled hours. Maybe the nettles were like four o'clocks or morning glories - maybe they were engineered by the ralias to open and to close the path so many times a day.

And what he imagined was the truth in part. A path, he saw, was opening. And waddling down the path was another rolla. The path opened in front of him and then closed as he passed.

The rolla came out into the trampled area and stood facing Doyle.

GOOD EVENING, HEEL, he said.

It couldn't be the rolla locked in the trunk of the car down on the river road. It must, Doyle told himself, be one of the two that had walked out on the money project.

YOU SICK? the rolla asked.

'I itch just something awful and my tooth is aching and every time I sneeze the top of my head comes off.'

COULD FIX

'Sure, you could grow a drug-store tree, sprouting lina-ments and salves and pills and all the other junk.'

SIMPLE, spelled the rolla.

'Well, now,' said Doyle and then tried to say no more. For suddenly it struck him that it would be as the rolla said

- very, very simple.

Most medicines came from plants and there wasn't anyone or anything that could engineer a plant the way the rollas could.

'You're on the level there,' said Doyle enthusiastically. 'You would be able to cure a lot of things. You might find a cure for cancer and you might develop something that would hold off heart disease. And there's the common cold . . .'

SORRY, PAL, BUT WE ARE OFF OF YOU. YOU MADE SAPS OF US.

Then you are one of them that ran away,' said Doyle in some excitement. 'You saw through Metcalfe's game . . .'

But the rolla was paying no attention to anything he said. It had drawn itself a little straighter and a little taller and it had formed its lips into a circle as if it might be getting ready to let out a bay and the sides of its throat were quivering as if it might be singing, but there was no sound.

No sound, but a rasping shrillness that skidded on one's nerves, a something in the air that set one's teeth on edge.

It was an eerie thing, that sense of singing terror in the silence of the dusk, with the west wind blowing quietly along the tops of the darkening trees, with the silky rustle of the nettles and somewhere in the distance the squeaking of a chipmunk homeward bound on the last trip of the day.

Out beyond the fence came the thumping of awkward running feet and in the thickening dusk Doyle saw the five rollas from the orchard plunging down the slope.

There was something going on. Doyle was sure of that. He sensed

the importance of the moment and the excitement that was in it, but there was no inkling of what it all might mean.

The rolla by his side had sent out some sort of rallying call, pitched too high for the human ear to catch, and now the orchard rollas were tumbling down the slope in answer to that call.

The five rollas reached the fence and lined up in their customary row and their blackboard chests were alive with glowing characters - the strange, flickering, nonsensical characters of their native language. And the chest of the one who stood outside the fence with Doyle also flamed with the fleeting symbols, changing and shifting so swiftly that they seemed to be alive.

It was an argument, Doyle thought. The five inside the fence were arguing heatedly with the one who stood outside and there seemed an urgency in the argument that could not be denied.

He stood there, on the edge of embarrassment, an innocent bystander pocketed in a family squabble he could not understand.

The rollas were gesturing wildly now and the characters upon their chests glowed more brightly than ever as darkness deepened on the land.

A squalling night bird flew overhead and Doyle tilted up his head to watch it and as he did he saw the moving figures of running men outlined against the lighter sky on the north ridge of the orchard.

'Watch out!' he shouted and wondered even as he shouted why he should have shouted.

At the shout the five rollas whirled back to face the fence.

One set of symbols appeared upon each chest, as if suddenly they might have reached agreement, as if the argument might finally be resolved.

There was a creaking sound and Doyle looked up quickly.

Against the sky he could see the old oak tree was tipping, slanting slowly toward the fence, as if a giant hand had reached out and given it a push.

He watched for a puzzled second and the tilt continued and the

speed of the fall picked up and he knew that the tree was crashing down upon the fence and the time had come to get out of there.

He stepped back a pace to turn around and flee and when he put his foot down there was no solid ground beneath it. He fought briefly to keep from falling, but he didn't have a chance. He fell and thumped into a crowded cavity and above him he heard the roaring rush of the falling tree and then the jarring thud as it hit the ground and the long, high whine of wires stretched so tight they pinged and popped.

Doyle lay quietly, afraid to move.

He was in a ditch of some sort. It was not very deep, not more than three feet at the most, but he was cramped at an awkward angle and there was an uncomfortable stone or root in the middle of his back.

Above him was a tracery of limbs and twigs, where the top of the oak had crashed across the ditch. And running through the fallen branches was a rolla, moving much more swiftly than one would have thought was possible.

From up the slope beyond the smashed-down fence came the bellowing of men and the sound of running feet.

Doyle huddled in his ditch glad of the darkness and of the shelter of the fallen tree.

The stone or root was still in his back and he wriggled to get off it. He slid off to one side and put out a hand to catch his balance and his hand came in contact with a mound of stuff that felt like sand.

And froze there. For just beyond the ditch, standing among the branches and the nettles, was a pair of legs and the loom of a body extending up into the darkness.

'They went down that way,' said a voice. 'Down into the woods. It will be hard to find them.'

Metcalfe's voice answered: 'We have to find them, Bill. We can't let them get away.'

There was a pause, then Bill said: T wonder what got into them. They seemed happy up till now.'

Metcalfe swore bitterly. 'It's that photographer. That fellow - what's

his name - I saw him when he was in the tree and he got away that time. But he won't make it this time. I don't know what he did or what's going on, but he's in it, clear up to his neck. He's around here somewhere.'

Bill moved away a little and Metcalfe said, 'If you run into this photographer, you know what to do.'

'Sure, boss.'

'Medium-sized guy. Has a dopey way about him.'

They moved away. Doyle could hear them thrashing through the nettles, cursing as the nettles stung them.

Doyle shivered a little.

He had to get out and he had to make it fast, for before too long the moon would be coming up.

Metcalfe and his boys weren't fooling. They couldn't afford to fool in a deal like this. If they spotted him, more than likely they would shoot to kill.

Now, with everyone out hunting down the rollas, would be the time to get up to that orchard. Although the chances were that Metcalfe had men patrolling it.

Doyle gave the idea some consideration and dropped it. There was, now, just one thing to do and that was get to the car down on the river road as fast as he could make it.

Cautiously, he crawled out of the ditch. Once out of it, he crouched for long minutes in the tangle of fallen branches, listening for sound. There wasn't any sound.

He moved out into the nettles, following the path that had been crushed down by the men who had pursued the rollas. But, crushed down or not, some of the nettles pegged him.

Then he started down the slope, running for the woods.

Ahead of him a shout went up and he braked his speed and swerved. He reached a clump of brush and hurled himself behind it as other shouts went up and then two shots, fired in quick succession.

He saw it moving above the treetops, rising from the woods - a

pale ghost of a thing that rose into the sky, with the red glint of early moonlight on it.

From it trailed a twisting line that had the appearance of a vine and from the vine hung a struggling doll-like figure that was screaming thinly. The ghost-like shape was stubby at the bottom and pointed at the top. It had the look about it of a ballooning Christmas tree and there was about it, too, even from a distance, a faint familiarity.

And suddenly Doyle linked up that familiarity - linked it to the woven mass of vegetation that had damned the creek bed. And as he linked it up, he knew without a question the nature of this Christmas tree riding in the sky.

The rollas worked with plants as Man would work with metals. They could grow a money tree and a protective strip of nettles that obeyed, they could make an oak tree fall and if they could do all that, the growing of a spaceship would not be too hard a job.

The ship was moving slowly, slanting up across the ridge, and the doll still struggled at the end of the trailing vine and its screams came down to earth as a far-off wailing sound.

Someone was shouting in the woods below:

'It's the boss! Bill, do something! It's the boss!'

It was quite apparent there was nothing Bill could do.

Doyle sprang from his bush and ran. Now was the time to make his dash, when all the other men were yelling and staring up into the sky, where Metcalfe dangled, screaming, from the trailing vine - perhaps an anchor vine, mayhaps just a part of the ro//«-grown spaceship that had become unravelled. Although, remembering the craftsmanship of that woven barrier blocking the creek-bed, it seemed unlikely to Doyle that anything would come unravelled from a rolla ship.

He could imagine what had happened - Metcalfe glimpsing the last of the rollas clambering up the ship and rushing at them, roaring, firing those two shots, then the ship springing swiftly upward and the trailing vine twisted round the ankle.

Doyle reached the woods and went plunging into it. The ground

dropped sharply and he went plunging down the slope, stumbling, falling, catching himself and going on again. Until he ran full tilt into a tree that bounced him back and put exploding stars inside his skull.

He sat upon the ground where the impact had bounced him and felt of his forehead, convinced it was cracked open, while tears of pain streamed down his cheeks.

His forehead was not cracked and there seemed to be no blood, although his nose was skinned and one lip began to puff.

Then he got up and went on slowly, feeling his way along, for despite the moonlight, it was black-dark beneath the trees.

Finally he came to the dry stream-bed and felt his way along it.

He hurried as best he could, for he remembered Mabel waiting in the car. She'd be sore at him, he thought - she'd sure be plenty sore. He had gone and let her think he might be back by dark.

He came to the place where the woven strip of vegetation dammed the stream-bed and almost tumbled over it onto the rocks below.

He ran the flat of his hand across the polished surface of the strip of weaving and tried to imagine what might have happened those several years ago.

A ship plunging down to Earth, out of control perhaps, and shattering on impact, with Metcalfe close at hand to effect a rescue.

It beats all hell, he thought, how things at times turn out.

If it had not been Metcalfe, given someone else who did not think in dollar signs, there might now be trees or bushes or rows of vegetables carrying hopes such as mankind had never known before - hope for surcease from disease and pain, an end to poverty and fear. And perhaps many other hopes that no one now could guess.

And they were gone now, in a spaceship grown by the two deserting rollas under Metcalfe's very nose.

He squatted atop the dam and knew the blasted hopes of mankind, the hope that had never come to be, wrecked by avarice and greed.

Now they were gone - but, wait a minute, not entirely gone! For there was a rolla left. He had to believe that the deserting rolla he had

never seen was with the others - but there was still his rolla, locked in the trunk of that old heap down on the river road!

He got up and stumbled through the darkness to the end of the dam and climbed around the clump of anchor trees. He skidded down the sharp incline to the stream-bed and went fumbling down the hollow.

What should he do, he wondered. Head straight for Washington? Go to the FBI?

For whatever else, no matter what might happen, that one remaining rolla must be gotten into proper hands.

Already there was too much lost. There could be no further chances taken. Placed in governmental or scientific hands, that one lone rolla might still retrieve much that had been lost.

He began to worry about what might have happened to the rolla, locked inside the trunk. He recalled that it had been banging for attention.

What if it is suffocated? What if there were something of importance, something abut its care, perhaps, that it had been vital that it tell him? What if that had been the reason for its banging on the trunk?

He fumbled down the stream-bed in sobbing haste, tripping on the gravel beds, falling over boulders. Mosquitoes flew a heavy escort for him and he flapped his hands to try and clear them off, but he was so worried that they seemed little more than an inconvenience.

Up in the orchard, more than likely, Metcalfe's mob was busy stripping trees, harvesting no one could guess how many millions in brand new, crinkly bills.

For now the jig was up and all of them would know it. Now there was nothing left to do but clean out the orchard and disappear as best they could.

Perhaps the money trees had required the constant attention of the rollas to keep on producing letter-perfect money. Otherwise why had Metcalfe had the rolla to tend the tree in town? And now, with the rollas gone, the trees might go on producing, but the money that they

grew might be defective and irregular, like the growth of nubbin corn.

The slope of the land told him that he was near the road.

He went on blindly and suddenly came upon the car. He went around it in the dark and rapped upon the window.

Inside, Mabel screamed.

'It's all right,' yelled Doyle. 'It is me. I'm back.'

She unlocked the door and he climbed in beside her. She leaned against him and he put an arm around her.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Sorry that I took so long.'

'Did everything go all right, Chuck?'

'Yes,' he mumbled. 'Yes, I imagine that you could say it did.'

'I'm so glad,' she said, relieved. 'It is all right, then. The rolla ran away.'

'Ran away! For God's sake, Mabel . . .'

'Now, please don't go getting sore, Chuck. He kept on with that banging and I felt sorry for him. I was afraid, of course, but more sorry than afraid. So I opened up the trunk and let him out and it was OK. He was the sweetest little chap

'So he ran away,' said Doyle, still not quite believing it. 'But he might still be around somewhere, out there in the dark.'

'No,' said Mabel, 'he is not around. He went up the hollow as fast as he could go, like a dog when his master calls. It was dark and I was scared, but I ran after him. I called and kept on following, but it was no use - I knew that he was gone.'

She sat up straight in the seat.

'It don't make no difference now,' she said. 'You don't need him any longer. Although I am sorry that he ran away. He'da made a dandy pet. He talked so nice - so much nicer than a parakeet - and he was so good. I tied a ribbon, a yellow piece of ribbon around his neck and you never seen anything so cute.'

'I just bet he was,' said Doyle.

And he was thinking of a rolla, rocketing through space in a new-grown ship, heading out for a far-off sun and taking with him possibly

some of man's greatest hopes, all fixed up and cute with a ribbon round his neck.

Party Line

I

Einstein did not come in. That was unusual. Very seldom was Einstein late or absent. Usually he was waiting, ready to take up again the patient teaching that had been going on for months. Jay Martin tried again.

- Einstein. Einstein. Are you there? Einstein was not there.

The console in front of Martin hummed and the sensor lights were flickering. The cubicle was quiet, an engineered quietness, insulated against all distraction. Martin reached up and adjusted the helmet more firmly on his head.

- Einstein. Einstein. Where are you?

A faint sense of beginning panic flicked across Martin's mind. Had Einstein finally given it all up as a bad job? Had he (or she, or it, or them?) simply slipped away, dropping him, finally despairing of making so ignorant a student understand what he had to say?

Something out there stirred, a thin whistle of distant emptiness. Strange, thought Martin, how it always came that way - the haunting sense of distant emptiness. When there was, in fact, no distance nor no emptiness involved. The carrier waves were immune to any of the limitations of the electromagnetic spectrum. Instantaneous, no lag, as if distance, matter, time did not exist.

- Einstein? he asked, convinced that it wasn't Einstein. It didn't feel like Einstein, although he would have been hard pressed if he had been called upon to tell how Einstein felt.

The thin whistle came again.

- Yes, said Martin, I'm here. Who are you?

And the voice (the thought? the pulse? the intelligence?) spoke.

- The turning point, it said.

- Unclear, said Martin. What turning point?

- The universe. The universe has reached its turning point.

Universal death has started. The universe has reached its farthest point. It now is running down. Entropy has been accomplished.

- That, said Martin, is a strange way to say it.

- The universe always strove toward entropy.

- Not here, said Martin. No entropy here. The stars still burn.

- At the edge. The outer fringe. The universe at the edge has reached the point of entropy. Heat death. No more energy. And now is falling back. It is retreating.

The distance whistled. The emptiness keened.

- You are at the edge?

- Near the rim. That is how we know. Our measurement . . .

The distance howled, drowning out the words.

- How long? asked Martin. How long till the end?

- Equal to the time since the beginning. Our calculations -

- Fifteen billion years, said Martin.

- We do not grasp your measurement.

-Never mind, said Martin. It makes no difference. I should not have said it.

- The pity of it! The irony!

- What pity? What irony?

- We have tried so long. Everyone has tried so long. To understand the universe and now we have no time.

- We have lots of time. Another fifteen billion years.

- You may have. We haven't. We're too close to the rim. We are in the dying zone.

A cry for help, thought Martin. The moaning of self pity. And was shaken. For there'd never been a cry for help before.

The other caught his thought.

- No cry for help, it said. There is no help. This is warning only.

The pulse, the thought cut off. Distance and emptiness whistled for a moment and then it, too, cut off.

Martin sat huddled in his cubicle, the weight of all that distance, all that emptiness crashing down upon him.

II

The day began badly for Paul Thomas.

The desk communicator chirped at him.

'Yes,' he said.

His secretary's voice said, 'Mr. Russell is here to see you.'

Thomas grimaced. 'Show him in,' he said.

Russell was prissy and precise. He came into the office and sat down in a chair across the desk from Thomas.

'What can I do for R&D this morning?' Thomas asked, ignoring all conversational preliminaries. Russell was a man who was impatient with social amenities.

'A lot more than you're doing,' Russell said. 'Goddammit, Paul, I know that you are hip-deep in data. It's piling up on you. We haven't had a thing from you in the last six months. I know the rules, of course, but aren't you giving them too strict an interpretation?'

'What are you interested in?'

'The faster-than-light business for one thing. I happen to know that Martin . . .'

'Martin still is working on it.'

'He must have something. Besides being a good telepath, he also happens to be a top-notch astrophysicist.'

'That's true,' said Thomas. 'We don't often get a man like him. Mostly, it's a raw farm boy or some girl who is clerking in the five-and-dime. We're running recruiting programs all the time, but . . .'

'You're trying to throw me off the track, Paul. I've got men aching to get started on this FTL thing. We know you're getting something.'

The funny thing about it is that we aren't.'

'Martin's been on it for months.'

'Yeah, for months. And not understanding anything he's getting. Both he and I are beginning to believe we may have the wrong man on it.'

'The wrong man on it? An astrophysicist?'

'Ben, it may not be physics at all.'

'But he has equations.'

'Equations, yes. But they make no sense. Equations aren't the magic thing all by themselves that people think they are. They have to make some sense and these make no sense. Jay is beginning to think they're something entirely outside the field of physics.'

'Outside the field of physics? What else could they be?'

'That's the question, Ben. You and I have been over this, again and again. You don't seem to understand. Or refuse to understand. Or are too pig-headed to allow yourself to understand. We aren't dealing with humans out there. I understand that and my people understand it. But you refuse to accept it. You think of those other people out there among the stars as simply funny-looking humans. I don't know, no one knows, what they really are. But we know they aren't humans, not even funny-looking humans. We wear ourselves out at times trying to work out what they are. Not because of any great curiosity on our part, but because we could work with them better if we knew. And we have no idea. You hear me? No idea whatsoever. Hal Rawlins is talking to someone he is convinced is a robot - a funny-looking robot, of course - but he can't even be sure of that. No one can be sure of anything at all. The point is that we don't really have to be. They accept us, we accept them. They are patient with us and we with them. They may be more patient than we are, for they know we are newcomers, new subscribers on this party line we share. None of them think like us, none of us think like them. We try to adapt ourselves to their way of thinking, they try to adapt themselves to our way of thinking. All we know for sure is that they are intelligences, all they know is that we are some outrageous kind of intelligent life form. We are, all of us, a brotherhood of intelligences, getting along the best we can, talking, gossiping, teaching, learning, trading information, laying out ideas.'

This is the kind of crap you're always talking,' said Russell, wrathfully. 'I don't give a damn about all your philosophizing. What I want is something to work on. The deal is that when you have something that is promising, you pass it on to us.'

'But the judgment is mine,' said Thomas, 'and rightly so. In some of the stuff we get here, there could be certain implications . . .'

'Implications, hell!'

'What are you doing with what we have given you? We gave you the data on artificial molecules. What have you done on that?'

'We're working on it.'

'Work harder, then. Quit your bellyaching and show some results on that one. You and I both know what it would mean. With it, we could built to order any material, put together any kind of structure we might wish. Could build the kind of world we want, to order. The materials we want to our own specifications - food, metal, fabrics, you name it.'

'Development,' Russell said, defensively, 'takes time. Keep your shirt on.'

'We gave you the data on cell replacement. That would defeat disease and old age. Carried to its ultimate degree, an immortal world - if we wanted an immortal world, and could control it and afford it. What are you doing with that?'

'We're working on that one, too. All these things take time.'

'Mary Kay thinks she has found what may be an ideal religion. She thinks that she may even have found God. At times, she says, she feels she's face to face with God. How about that one? We'll hand it over to you anytime you say.'

'You keep that one. What we want is FTL.'

'You can't have FTL. Not until we know more. As you say, we have mountains of data on it . . .'

'Give me that data. Let my boys get to work on it.'

'Not yet. Not until we have a better feel of it. To tell you the truth, Ben, there's something scary about it.'

'What do you mean, scary?'

'Something wrong. Something not quite right. You have to trust our judgment.'

'Look, Paul, we've gone out to Centauri. Crawled out there. Took years to get there, years to get back. And nothing there. Not a

goddamn thing. Just those three suns. We might just as well not have gone. That killed star travel. The public wouldn't stand still for another one like that. We have to have FTL, or we'll never go to the stars. Now we know it can be done. You guys have it at your fingertips and you won't let us in on it.'

'As soon as we have something even remotely possible, we'll hand it over to you.'

'Couldn't we just have a look at it? If it's as bad, as screwed up as you say it is, we'll hand it back.' Thomas shook his head. 'Not a chance,' he said.

Ill

There were no words, although there was the sense of unspoken words. No music, but the sense of music. No landscape ,butafeeloftallslendertrees, graceful in the wind; of park-like lawns surrounding stately houses; of a running brook glistening in an unseen sun, babbling over stones; of a lake with whitecaps racing in to shore. No actuality, but a compounded belief that a shattering actuality lurked just around the corner, waiting to burst out.

Mary Kay sank into it and let all of it enfold her. This time, she had thought, this time, please God, there will be something that I can understand. But once she had sunk into it, she no longer prayed there would be something to take back. This, in itself, was quite enough. This was all that anyone might want, or need. What was here filled the soul and wiped out the mind.

A stray, human thought intruded, but only momentarily:

Some day I'll have it; some day there will be data. Some day there'll be an inkling.

And then the thought snapped off. For there was no need to know. Being here was all.

She was no longer human. She was not anything at all. She simply existed. She was stripped of everything but the inner core of consciousness. She had no body and no mind. The intellectuality took in only the wonder and the breath-catching happiness, the innocent

sensuality, the mindless well-being and the Tightness of it all - the Tightness of being here. Wherever here might be. She did not even wonder at the here. She simply did not care.

Duty and purpose struggled feebly with the carelessness.

- But? she cried, why show me only? Why not tell me, too? I'm an intelligence. I want to know. I have the right to know.

- Sh-h-h-h-h

A shushing, a lullaby. A compassion. A tenderness.

Then the holiness.

She surrendered herself wholly to the holiness.

IV

They looked to him, thought Thomas. That was the hell of it; they all looked to him for guidance, direction and comfort and he had none of these to give. They were out there on the firing line and he was sitting safely back and it would seem there should be something he could offer. But try as he might, he knew that he had nothing. Each of them a sensitive, for if they were not sensitives, they'd not be telepaths.

It took raw courage, he thought, a special kind of courage, to reach out into the cosmos, out into that place where time and space pressed close even if time and space were cancelled out. Even knowing this, knowing that space-time had been brushed aside, the consciousness of it must be always there, the fear of it always there, the fear of being snared and left and lost within the deepest gulf of it. A special courage to face up to another mind that might be only a few light-years distant or millions of light-years distant, and the alienness that the light-years conjured up and magnified. And, worst of all, the never-forgotten realization that one was a newcomer in this community of intelligence, a novice, a hick, the bottom of the totem pole. A tendency to be retiring and apologetic, even when there was no reason to be apologetic. A kindergartener in a school where high school seniors and college students reared to godlike heights.

Thomas rose from his desk and walked across the room to stand before a window. The desert lay outside, aloof and noncaring, a

humped plain of sand and rock, sterile and hostile. Better judgment would have been to place this installation, he thought, in a kinder land where there would be friendly trees and purling streams and forest paths to walk in. But the desert, in the administrative mind, served a better purpose. Its long distances, its discomforts and its loneliness discouraged the curious who otherwise might come flocking in to stare. No secret project, in the usual sense, but one about which not too much was said, about which as little as possible was said in the unspoken but devout hope that in time it might disappear from the public mind.

A spooky thing - too spooky to be thrown open. A shuddery business, this reaching out to other minds across the universe. Not something which the public comfortably could sleep with. And what was the matter with the public? Thomas asked himself. Did they not realize that the project was mankind's greatest hope? For thousands of years, mankind had staggered along on its own, coddling its prejudices, making its mistakes, then multiplying rather than correcting them, slipping into a too-human groove that had brought, in its turn, untold misery and injustice. New blood was needed, a new mentality, and the one place to get it was from those cultures far among the stars. A cross-pollination process that could improve the texture and might revise the purpose of mankind's stumbling destiny.

The box on his desk chirped at him. He strode from the window and snapped down the toggle.

'What is it, Evelyn?'

'Senator Brown is on the phone.'

'Thank you,' said Thomas.

There was no one he wanted to talk with less than the senator.

He leaned back in his chair and pressed the button to activate the visor. The visor lighted to reveal the hatchet-face of the senator - ascetic, thin, wrinkled, but with a tightness to the wrinkles.

'Senator,' he said, 'how kind of you to call.'

'I thought to pass the time of day,' said the senator. 'It has been a

long time since we have had a chat.'

'Yes, it has.'

'As you may know,' said the senator, 'the budget for your project is coming up before committee in the next few weeks. I can get nothing out of these jackasses who are your superiors in Washington. They talk about knowledge being the most precious commodity. They say no market value can be placed upon it. I wonder if you would concur.'

'I think I would,' said Thomas, 'although, if that is all they say, it's a fairly general statement. There is so much spinoff. I suppose they told you that.'

They did,' said the senator. 'They dwelt most lovingly upon it.'

'Then what is it you want of me?'

'Realism. Some old-fashioned realism. A hard-headed assessment.'

'I'm fairly close to the operation. It's hard for me to step back those few necessary paces to take a good objective look at it.'

'Well, do the best you can. This is off-the-record. Just between the two of us. If necessary, we'll have you in to testify. To start with, maybe, how good are the chances for FTL?'

'We are working on it, senator. I have a feeling we still have a long way to go. We're beginning to have a feeling that it may not be a simple matter of physical laws.'

'What could it be, then?'

'Emphasizing the fact that we do not really know, I'd be willing to hazard a guess that it might be something we have never heard of. A procedure, or a technique, maybe even a state of mind, that is outside all human experience.'

'Now you're going mystic on me. I don't like this mystic stuff.'

'In no way mystic, senator. Just a willingness to admit mankind's limitations. It stands to reason that one race on one planet is not going to come up with everything there is.'

'Have you anything to back that up?'

'Senator, I think I have. For the last several months, one of our

operators has been trying to explain to his opposite number some of the fundamentals of our economic system. It has been and still is a trying task. Even the simplest fundamentals - things like buying and selling, supply and demand - have been hard to put across. Those folks out there, whoever they are, have never even thought of our brand of economics, if, in fact, any kind of economics. What makes it even harder is that they appear to stand in absolute horror of some of the things we tell them. As if the very ideas were obscene.'

'Why bother with them, then?'

'Because they still maintain an interest. Perhaps the ideas are so horrible that they have a morbid fascination for them. As long as they maintain that interest, we'll keep on working with them.'

'Our idea in starting this project was to help ourselves, not a lot of other folks.'

'It's a two-way street,' said Thomas. They help us, we help them. They teach us, we teach them. It's a free interchange of information. And we're not being as altruistic as you think. It is our hope that as we go along with this economic business, we'll pick up some hints.'

'What do you mean, some hints?'

'Perhaps some indications of how we may be able to revise or modify our economic system.'

'Thomas, we have spent five or six thousand years or more in working out that economic system.'

'Which doesn't mean, senator, that it is letter perfect. We made mistakes along the way.'

The senator grunted. This, I take it, will be another long-term project?'

'All of our work, or the most of it, is long-term. Most of what we get is not readily or easily adapted to our use.'

'I don't like the sound of it,' growled the senator. 'I don't much like anything I hear. I asked you for specifics.'

'I've given you specifics. I could spend the rest of the day giving you specifics.'

'You've been at this business for twenty-five years?'

'On a job like this, twenty-five years is a short time.'

'You tell me you're getting nowhere on FTL. You're piddling away your time teaching an economics course to some stupid jerks who are having a hard time knowing what you are talking about.'

'We do what we can,' said Thomas.

'It's not enough,' said the senator. The people are getting tired of seeing their taxes go into the project. They were never very much for it to start with. They were afraid of it. You could slip, you know, and give away our location.'

'No one has ever asked for our location.'

They might have ways of getting it, anyhow.'

'Senator, that's an old bugaboo that should long ago have been laid to rest. No one is going to attack us. No one is going to invade us. By and large, these are intelligent, and I would suspect, honorable gentlemen with whom we're dealing. Even if they're not, what we have here would not be worth their time and effort. What we are dealing in is information. They want it from us, we want it from them. It's worth more than any other commodity that any of us may have.'

'Now we're back to that again.'

'But, dammit, senator, that's what it's all about.'

'I hope you're not letting us be taken in by some sort of slicker out there.'

That's a chance we have to take, but I doubt it very much. As director of this branch of the project, I've had the opportunity . . .'

The senator cut him off. Til talk with you some other time.'

'Any time,' said Thomas, as affably as he was able. Til look forward to it.'

They had gathered in the lounge, as was their daily custom, for a round of drinks before dinner.

Jay Martin was telling about what had happened earlier in the day.

'It shook me,' he said. 'Here was this voice, from far away . . .'

'How did you know it was far away?' asked Thomas. 'Before they

told you, that is.'

'I can tell,' said Martin. 'You get so you can tell. There is a certain smell to distance.'

He bent over quickly, reaching for a handkerchief, barely getting it up in time to muffle the explosive sneeze. Straightening, he mopped his face, wiped his streaming eyes.

'Your allergy again.' said Mary Kay.

Tm sorry,' he said. 'How in hell can a man pick up pollen out here in this desert? Nothing but sage and cactus.'

'Maybe it's not pollen,' said Mary Kay. 'It could be mold. Or dandruff. Has anyone here got dandruff?'

'You can't be allergic to human dandruff. It has to be cat dandruff,' said Jennie Sherman.

'We haven't any cats here,' said Mary Kay, 'so it couldn't be cat dandruff. Are you sure about human dandruff, Jennie?'

Tm sure,' said Jennie. 'I read it somewhere.'

'Ever see a physician about it?' asked Thomas.

Martin shook his head, still mopping at his eyes.

'You should,' said Thomas. 'You could be given allergy tests. A battery of tests until they find what you're allergic to.'

'Go ahead and tell us more,' said Richard Garner, 'about this guy who said the world was about to end.'

'Not the world,' said Martin. 'The universe. He was just spreading the word. In a hurry to spread the word. As if they'd just found out. Like Chicken Little, yelling that the sky was falling. Talking for just a minute, then dropping out. I suppose going on to someone else. Trying to catch everyone he could. Sounded a little frantic. As if there was little time.'

'Maybe it was a joke,' suggested Jennie.

'I don't think so. It didn't sound like a joke. I don't think any of the people out there joke. If so, I've never heard of it. Maybe we're the only ones who have a sense of humor. Anyone here ever hear anything that sounded like a joke?'

They shook their heads.

The rest of you are halfway laughing at it,' said Mary Kay. 'I don't think it's funny at all. Here are these people out on the rim, trying all these years, for no one knows how many centuries, to understand the universe, then up pops someone and tells them the universe has run down and they, out at the edge of it, will be the first to go. Maybe they were very close to understanding. Maybe they needed only a few more years and now they haven't got the years.'

'Would that be the way it would happen?' asked Hal Rawlins. 'Jay, you're the physicist. You'd be the one to know.'

'I can't be certain, Hal. We don't know enough about the structure of the universe. There might be certain conditions that we are not aware of. Entropy presupposes a spreading out, so that the total energy of a thermodynamic system is so evenly distributed that there is no energy available for work. That's not the case here, of course. Out at the rim of the universe, maybe. The energy and matter out there would be old, have had more time. Or would it? God, I don't know. I'm talking about something no one knows about.'

'But you finally contacted Einstein,' said Thomas.

'Yes, he came in a little later.'

'Anything?'

'No, the same as ever. We both got tired after a time, I guess. And talked about something else.'

'Is that the way it often goes?'

'Every now and then. Today we talked about houses. Or I think it was houses. Near as I can make out, they live in some sort of bubble. Got the impression of huge webs with bubbles scattered through them. Do you suppose Einstein could be some sort of spider?'

'Could be,' said Thomas.

'What beats the hell out of me,' said Martin, 'is why Einstein sticks with me. He beats his brains out trying to tell me about FTL and I beat my brains out trying to understand what he's telling me and never getting it. I swear I'm not a great deal closer than I was to start with,

but he doesn't give up on me. He just keeps boring in. What I can't figure is what he's getting out of it.'

'Every once in a while I get the funny feeling,' said Garner, 'that maybe these aren't different people who are talking to us. Not a lot of different cultures, but a lot of different individuals, maybe different specialists, from the same society.'

'I doubt that's true,' said Jennie Sherman. 'Mine has a personality. A real personality. And different, very different, from the personalities the rest of you talk about. This one of mine is obsessed with death . . .'

'What a doleful subject,' said Rawlins. 'But I guess you've told us about him before. Talking about death all this time . . .'

'It was depressing to start with,' said Jennie, 'but it's not any more. He's made a philosophy out of it. At times, he makes death sound almost beautiful.'

'A decadent race,' said Garner.

'It's not that at all. I thought so at first. But he's so joyful about it, so happy.'

'Death, Jennie, is not a joyful or happy subject,' said Thomas. 'We've talked about this, you and I. Maybe you should put an end to it. Pick up someone else.'

'I will if you say so, Paul. But I have a feeling that something will come out of it. Some new kind of understanding, a new philosophy, a new principle. You haven't looked at the data, have you?'

Thomas shook his head.

'I can't tell why I feel this way,' she said. 'But deep down, at the bottom of me, I do.'

'For the moment,' said Thomas, 'that's good enough for me.'

Rawlins said, 'Jay spoke of something that bugs me, too. What are they getting out of it? What are any of them getting out of it? We're giving them nothing.'

'That's your guilt talking,' said Thomas. 'Perhaps it's something all of us are feeling. We must get rid of it. Wipe it from our minds. We

feel intensely that we are beginners, that we're the new kid in the neighborhood. We are takers, not givers, although that's not entirely true. Dick has spent weeks trying to explain economics to his people.'

Garner made a wry face. 'Trying is all I do. I try to reduce the basics to the lowest common denominator. Thoughts of one syllable. Each syllable said slowly. Printed in big type. And they don't seem to get it. As if the very idea of economics was completely alien to them. As if hearing it were somehow distasteful. How in the world could a civilization develop and have any continuity without an economic system? I can't envision it. With us, economics is our life blood. We'd be nothing without an economic system. We'd be in chaos.'

'Maybe that's what they're in,' said Rawlins. 'Maybe chaos is a way of life for them. No rules, no regulations, nothing. Although even as I say it, that doesn't sound quite right. Such a situation would be beyond our understanding, as repugnant to us as our economics seem to be to them.'

'We all have our blind spots,' said Thomas. 'We're beginning to find that out.'

'It would help though, it would help a lot,' said Martin, 'if we could feel we'd done something for one or two of them. It would give us a feeling of status, of having paid our dues.'

'We're new at it,' said Thomas. The time will come. How are you getting along with your robot, Hal?'

'Damned if I know,' said Rawlins. 'I can't pin him down to anything. I can't get in a word. This robot, if it is a robot, if it's some sort of computer system - and for the life of me,

I can't tell you why I think it is. But, anyhow, it is a non-stop talker. Information, most of it trivial, I suspect, just flows out of it. Never sticks to one thing. Talks about one thing, then goes chattering off to something entirely unrelated. As if it had a memory bank filled to the brim with data and trying, as rapidly as possible, to spew out all that information. When I pick up something that seems to have some promise to it, something that could be of more than usual interest, I try

to break in to talk at greater length about it, to ask some questions. Most often I can't break in, occasionally there are times I can. But when I do this, he is impatient with me. He cuts off the discussion and goes back to his chatter. There are times when I get the impression that he's not talking to me alone, but to a lot of other people. I have the idea that when I am able to break in, he uses one circuit to talk with me directly while he goes on talking to all those others through other circuits.'

Thomas put his empty glass on the table beside him, rose to his feet. 'The others are starting in for dinner,' he said. 'Shall we join them.'

VI

Robert Allen, the project psychiatrist, rotated the brandy snifter between his palms.

'You sent word you wanted to see me, Paul. Has something come up?'

'I don't think so,' Thomas said. 'Not anything I can put a finger on. Maybe just a bad day, that's all. Ben Russell was in to raise hell with me. Said we were holding back on him.'

'He's always saying that.'

'I know. He's probably catching heat himself. When he catches heat, he turns it back on me. A feedback mechanism. A defensive gesture. He was upset that we'd not passed FTL data on to him.'

'Have we got anything to pass?-'

'Just a lot of nothing. Some meaningless equations. I don't see how Jay stands up under it. He picked up that allergy of his again.'

'Tension,' said Allen. 'Frustration. That could bring it on.'

'Later in the day,' said Thomas, 'Brown phoned.'

The senator?'

'The senator. It was FTL again. He was all over me. The budget's coming up again.'

'Faster-than-light is something that the administrative mind can understand,' said Allen. 'Hardware.'

'Bob, I'm not too sure it's hardware. It could be something else. Jay's an astrophysicist. If it was plain physics, he would have it pegged.'

'Maybe there are many kinds of physics.'

'I don't think so. Physics should be basic. The same throughout the universe.'

'You can be sure of that?'

'No, I can't be sure of that. But my logic rejects . . .'

'Paul, you're over-reacting. If I were you, I'd disregard this sudden flurry over FTL. It's something that comes periodically and then dies down again.'

'I can't disregard it,' said Thomas. 'Not this time. Brown's out to get us. His power base is slipping and he needs a new issue. We would make a good issue. Here we are, here we've been for a quarter century, gobbling up tax money that could be used for something else. That's the kind of issue the people would accept. They definitely are not with us; they have a feeling that we were crammed down their throats. They were never with us. Not only do we cost a lot, but we pose threats. What if we gave away our location, so that some barbaric, bloodthirsty alien horde could come crashing in on us? What if we find out something that would upset the apple-cart, wrecking a lot of our time-honored, comfortable concepts?'

'You mean he'd destroy us just to get elected?'

'Bob, you don't know politics. I am sure he would. Even if he believed in us, he might. I have a feeling that he doesn't believe in us. If he destroyed us, he'd be a public hero. We have to do something, come up with something in the next few months or he'll have a go at us.'

'We have support,' said Allen. There are people in authority, in positions of power, who are committed to the project. Good people, reasonable people.'

'Good and reasonable people don't have too much chance when they come up against a demagogue. The only way to beat Brown, if

he decides to make us an issue, is to pile up some points we can make with the public.'

'How can I help you, Paul?'

'Honestly, I don't know. A psychiatrist as a political adviser? No, I guess not. I suppose I only wanted to unload on you.'

'Paul, you didn't ask me in to talk about FTL. That's an administrative matter. You can handle it. Nor about the politics of the project. You know I'm a child in politics. There is something else.'

Thomas frowned. 'It's hard to tell you. Hard to put into words. I'm beginning to sense something that disturbs me. Nothing concrete. Fuzzy, in fact. Tonight Jennie - you know Jennie?'

'Yes, the little car-hop we picked up a few years ago. Nice girl. Smart.'

Tonight Jennie was talking about her people. They talk about death, she said. I knew it, of course. She'd been in a couple of times to talk with me about it. Depressed. Perhaps even frightened. After all, death can be a grisly subject. She had wanted to drop these people, try to pick up someone else. I urged her to hang in there a little longer. Never can tell what will happen, I told her. Tonight, when I suggested that she should drop it, she opposed me. Let me stay a while longer, she said, some worthwhile philosophy might develop out of it. I think there was something she wasn't telling me, something she is holding back.'

'Maybe the discussion has advanced beyond death,' said Allen. 'Maybe it's getting into what happens after death - if anything happens after death.'

Thomas looked in amazement at the psychiatrist. 'My thought, exactly. With one qualification. If nothing happens after death, she'd be more depressed than ever. Her interest must mean that these folks do believe something happens. They may even have proof of it. Not faith, not a religious conviction. Jennie's a hard-headed little piece. She'd not buy simple faith. It would have to be more than that.'

'You could pull the data. Have a look at it.'

'No, I can't. Not yet. She'd know. I'd be snooping on her private project. My operators are fiercely jealous of what they are putting into their data banks. I have to give her time. She'll let me know when it's time to have a look.'

'We must always keep in mind,' said Allen, 'that more than words, more than thoughts and ideas, come through from the aliens. Other things are transmitted. Things the operators hear but that can't be put into the banks. Fears, hopes, perceptions, residual memories, philosophical positions, moral evaluations, hungers, sorrow . . .'

T know,' said Thomas, 'and none of it gets into the banks. It would be easier in one way if it did, perhaps more confusing in another.'

'Paul, I know how easy it must be for someone in your position to become overly concerned, overwhelmed with worry, perhaps, even at times doubtful of the wisdom of the project. But you must remember, we've been at it only a little more than twenty years. We've done well in that short space of time . . .'

The project,' said Thomas, 'really started about a hundred years ago. With that old gentleman who was convinced he was talking with the stars. What was his name? Do you recall it?'

'George White. The last years of his life must have been a nightmare. The government took him over, ran him through all sorts of tests. They never let him be. I suspect he might have been happier if everyone had continued not believing him. They pampered him of course. That might have, in some measure, made it up to him. We still pamper our telepaths. Giving them a luxurious residential compound, with country club overtones, and . . .'

They have it coming to them,' snapped Thomas. 'They are all we have. They're our one great hope. Sure, we've made strides. Progress if you want to call it that. The world existing in a sort of loose confederation; wars a thing of the past. Colonies and industries in space. A start made on terraforming Mars and Venus. One largely abortive voyage to the nearest stars. But we have our problems. Despite expansion into space, our economy still is kicked all out of

shape. We continually ride on the edge of economic disaster. Our disadvantaged are still stockpiled against that day, that probably will never come, when we will be able to do something for them. The development of synthetic molecules would give us a boost if R&D would get cracking on it instead of moaning about not having FTL. I have some hopes that Garner may get some feedback from the aliens he is trying to teach economics to, but nothing yet, maybe nothing ever. It's the only economics show we have going. I had hoped others might come up, but they haven't. The hell of it is that so much of what we have going is producing so little. Much of it is seemingly off on the wrong track. Yet you can't junk all this stuff and start grabbing out frantically for something else. Mary Kay, for example. She has found something that might be big, but she's so hooked on it that she can't look for answers. When she tries, there are no answers. No idea communications at all, apparently. Just this feeling of euphoria. Worthless as it stands, but we can't pass it by. We have to keep on trying. There may be something there that is worth waiting for.'

'I think the greatest problem lies in the kind of people who turn out to be the right kind of telepaths,' said Allen. 'Jay is the only man trained in science that we have. The others are not equipped to handle some of the material they are getting. I still think we could try to give some of them training in certain fields.'

'We tried it,' said Thomas, 'and it didn't work. These are a special breed of people. Sensitives. They have to be handled with kid gloves or you destroy them. And under special kinds of strain. The strange thing about it, fragile as some of their personalities may be, they stand up to these special strains. Many ordinary people would crack if they knew they were in contact with an alien mind. A few of ours have, but not many. They have stood up under it. But they occasionally need support. It's my job to try to give it to them. They come to me with their fears, their doubts, their glory and elation. They cry on my shoulder, they scream at me . . .'

'The one thing that astounds me,' said Allen, 'is that they still maintain their relationships with non-telepaths. They are, as you have said, a very special breed. To them, it might seem, the rest of us would be little better than cloddish animals. Yet that does not seem to be the case. They've retained their humanity. It has been my observation, as well, that they don't get chummy with the aliens they are working with. Books. I guess that's it. They treat the aliens as books they'd take down off the shelf to read for information.'

'All of them except Jay. He has worked up a fairly easy relationship with this last one. Calls him Einstein. None of the others have names for their aliens.'

'Jay is a good man. Wasn't he the one who came up with the synthetic molecules?'

'That's right. He was one of the first successful operators. The first, if I remember rightly, who tolerated the brain implant. Others got the implant, but they had trouble with it. Some of them a lot of trouble. Of course, by the time Jay got his, there had been some improvement.'

'Paul, is the implant absolutely necessary?'

'The boys upstairs think it is. I don't know enough about it, technically that is, to be sure. First, you have to find the right kind of telepath - not just a high quality telepath, but the right kind. Then the implant is made, not to increase the range, as some people will tell you, but to re-enforce the natural ability. It also has something to do, quite a bit to do, with the storage of the information. Range, as such, probably is not really important. On the face of it, it shouldn't be, for the waves or pulses or whatever they are that enable telepaths to talk to one another are instantaneous. The time and distance factors are cancelled out entirely and the pulses are immune to the restrictions of the electromagnetic spectrum. They are a phenomenon entirely outside the spectrum.'

'Key, of course, to the entire project,' said Allen, 'lay in the development of the capability to record and store the information that is exchanged in the telepathic communication. A development of the

earlier brain-waves studies.'

'You're right,' said Thomas. 'It would have been impossible to rely on the memories of the telepaths. Many of them, most of them, in fact, have only a marginal understanding of what they are told; they are handling information that is beyond their comprehension. They have a general idea, probably, but they miss a lot of it. Jay is an exception, of course. And that makes it easier with him. But with the others, the ones who do not fully understand, we have a record of the communications in the memory bank.'

'We need more operators,' said Allen. 'We're barely touching all the sources out there. And we can't go skipping around a lot because if we did, we might be passing up some fairly solid material. We do our recruiting and we uncover a lot of incipient telepaths, of course, but very few of the kind we are looking for.'

'At no time,' said Thomas, 'are there ever too many of them to find.'

'We got off what we were talking about,' said Allen. 'Mary Kay and Jennie, wasn't it?'

'I guess it was. They're the question marks. Jay either will pin down the matter of FTL or he'll not be able to. Dick will keep on with the economics and will either get some worth-while feedback or he won't. Those are the kinds of odds we have to play. Hal will go on talking with his alien computer and we eventually may get something out of it. One of these days, we'll jerk the memory banks on that one and see what we have. I'd guess there might be some nebulous ideas we could play around with. But Mary Kay and Jennie - Christ, they're into something that is beyond anything we ever bargained for. Mary Kay a simulation - or maybe even the actuality - of a heavenly existence, a sort of Paradise, and Jennie with overtones of an existence beyond the grave. These are the kinds of things that people have been yearning for since the world began. This is what made billions of people, over the ages, tolerate religions. It poses a problem - both of them pose problems.'

'If something came of either of them,' said Allen, 'what would we do

with it?'

That's right. Yet, you can't go chicken on it. You can't just turn it off because you're afraid of it.'

'You're afraid of it, Paul?'

T guess I am. Not personally. Personally, like everyone else, I would like to know. But can you imagine what would happen if we dumped it on the world?'

'I think I can. A sweep of unrealistic euphoria. New cults rising and we have more cults than we can handle now. A disruptive, perhaps a destructive impact on society.'

'So what do we do? It's something we may have to face.'

'We play it by ear,' said Allen. 'We make a decision when we have to. As project manager, you can control what comes out of here. Which may make Ben Russell unhappy, but something like this business of Mary Kay and Jennie is precisely why the director was given that kind of authority.'

'Sit on it?' asked Thomas.

'That's right. Sit on it. Watch it. Keep close tabs on it. But don't fret about it. Not now at least. Fretting time may be some distance down the road.'

'I don't know why I bothered you,' said Thomas. 'That's exactly what I intended all along.'

'You bothered me,' said Allen, 'because you wanted someone in to help you finish up that bottle.'

Thomas reached for the bottle. 'Let's be about it, then.'

VII

'If you had to invent a universe,' asked Mary Kay, 'if you really had to, I mean; if it was your job and you had to do it, what kind of universe would you invent?'

'A universe that went on and on,' said Martin. 'A universe with no beginning and no end. Hoyle's kind of universe.

Where there'd be the time and space for everything that possibly could happen, to happen.'

That entropy thing really got to you, didn't it. A voice out of the void saying it was all coming to an end.'

Martin crinkled his forehead. 'More now than it did to start with. Now that I've had time to think it over. Christ, think of it. We've been sitting here, us and all the people before us, thinking that there was no end, ever. Telling ourselves we had all the time there is. Not considering our own mortality, that is. Thinking racially, not of ourselves alone. Not ourselves, but all the people who come after us. An expanding universe, we told ourselves. And maybe now it isn't. Maybe, right this minute, it is a contracting universe. Rushing back, all the old dead matter, all the played-out energy.'

'It has no real bearing on us,' said Mary Kay. 'No physical effect. We won't be caught in the crunch, not right away at least. Our agony is intellectual. It does violence to our concept of the universe. That's what hurts. That a thing so big, so beautiful - the only thing we really know - is coming to an end.'

'They could have been wrong,' he said. They might have miscalculated. Their observations might have been faulty. And it might not really be the end. There might still be another universe. Once everything retreated back as far as it could go, there might be another cosmic explosion and another universe.'

'But it wouldn't be the same,' she said. 'It would be a different universe. Not our universe. It would give rise to different kinds of life, new kinds of intellect. Or maybe no life or intellect at all. Just the matter and the energy. Stars burning for themselves. No one to see them and to wonder. That, Jay, is what has made our universe so wonderful. Little blobs of life that held the capacity to wonder.'

'Not only the wonder,' Jay told her, 'but the audacity to probe beyond the wonder. The grief in that warning was not that the universe was coming to an end, but that it was doing so before someone could find out what it was.'

'Jay, I've been wondering . . .'

'You're always wondering. What is it this time?'

'It's silly. All my wondering is silly. But, do you suppose that we can experience things in time, reach things in time as well as in space?'

T don't know. I've never thought of it.'

'You know this place I've found. So quiet. So wonderful. So happy and so holy. Have you any idea of what it might be?'

'Let's not get into that right now,' said Jay. 'You'll just upset yourself. Everyone else has left. Maybe we should be leaving, too.'

He looked around the empty lounge, made a motion to get up. She reached for his arm and held him there.

'I've been thinking about it,' she said. 'I've been wondering if this place of mine is what is left after everything is gone. When the universe is gone. The few good things left over, the worthwhile things left over. The things we have never valued enough. We or any of the others out there. The peace, the love, the holiness. These are the things, I think, that will survive.'

T don't know, Mary. God, how could I know.'

'I hope it is,' she said. T so hope it is. I have a feeling that it is. I go so much on feeling. In the place I found, you have to depend on what you feel. There is nothing else. Just the feeling. Do you ever depend on feeling, Jay?'

'No, I don't,' he told her. He got to his feet, put out a hand to help her up. 'Do you know,' he said, 'that you are beautiful and crazy.'

Suddenly he bent double getting the handkerchief to his face barely in time to catch the sneeze.

'Poor Jay,' she said. 'You still have your allergy.'

VIII

Martin settled himself before the console, shoved the helmet more comfortably into place. The helmet was a nuisance, but he had to wear it, for it was the mechanism that fed the information into the data banks.

- Einstein, are you there? he asked.

-1 am here, said Einstein, ready to begin. You have your allergy again. Are you ingesting chemicals?

- Yes. And they don't help a lot.
- We sorrow for you greatly.
- I thank you very much, said Martin.
- When last we quit, we were discussing . . .
- A moment, Einstein. I have a question. -Ask.
- It has nothing to do with what we were discussing. It's a question I long have wanted to ask and never had the courage.
-Ask.
- For a long time, we have been talking about faster-than-light and I am not understanding. You've been patient with me. You overlook my stupidity. Still willing to keep on, when at times it must seem hopeless to you. I want to ask you why. Why are you willing to keep on?
- Simple, Einstein said. You help us. We help you.
- But I haven't helped you.
- Yes, you have. You recall occasion first we took notice of your allergy?
- That was a long time ago.
- We asked you can you do anything to help it. And you say a term at the time we do not know.
- Medicine?
- That was it. We asked you, medicine? And you explain. Chemicals you say. Chemicals we know.
- Yes, I guess I did say that.
- Medicine-chemicals entirely new to us. Never heard of them. Never thought of them.
- You mean you had no idea of medicine?
- Correct. Affirmative. Had no idea, ever.
- But, you never asked me about it. I would have been willing to tell you.
- We did ask. Now and then we asked. Very briefly, very carefully. So you would not know.
- Why? Why briefly? Why carefully?
- So great a thing. Too big to share with others. Now I see we

misjudge you. I am very sorry.

- You should be, Martin said. I thought you were my friend.

- Friend, of course, but even among friends . . .

- You were willing to tell of faster-than-light.

- No great thing. Many others have it. Very simple, once you catch it.

- I'm glad to hear you say so. How are you doing on medicine?

- Slowly, but some progress. Things we need to know.

- So go ahead and ask. said Martin.

IX

Thomas looked questioningly across the desk at Martin.

'You mean to tell me, Jay, that Einstein's people had never thought of medicine. That they know chemistry and had never thought of medicine?'

'Well, it's not quite that simple,' said Martin. They have a hang-up. Their bodies are sacred. Temples of their souls. Einstein didn't actually say that; it is my interpretation of what he said. But, anyhow, their bodies are sacred and they don't tamper with them.'

'In that case, they'll have a hell of a time selling medicine to their public.'

'I suppose so. But with Einstein and some of his fellows, that's different. An elite clique, I gather, standing above the general public, perhaps a bit contemptuous of the public, not sharing all the superstitions the general public holds. Willing, even anxious, to pick up what might be considered iconoclastic ideas. Willing, at least, to have a try at them. With the forces of the old beliefs and prejudices bearing on them, however, it's not to be wondered at that they never thought of medicine.'

They're willing to let you tell them about it?'

'Anxious. Strangely excited about it - a sort of nervous excitement. As if they know they're doing wrong, but are going to do it anyhow. All I can give them, of course, is the basic thinking on medicine. They'll have to work out the details themselves, adapting them to their

situation. I gave them what I could today. I'll have to bone up on the theory of medicine to give them much more. There should be material in the library.'

'I'm sure there is,' said Thomas.

'I thought for a while I'd lost Einstein. I told him that to develop medicine they'd have to know about their bodies . . .'

'And since their bodies are sacred . . .'

Martin nodded. That's the idea, exactly. Einstein asked how they'd get to know about their bodies and I said dissection. I told him what dissection was and that was when I thought I'd blown it. He was getting more than he asked for, more than he really wanted, and a lot of it he didn't like. But he was a man about it; he gulped and gagged somewhat and finally came to terms with it. It appears he is a devoted soul. Once he gets his teeth into something, he hangs onto it.'

'You think he and the rest of his clique will go ahead with it?'

'I'm not sure, Paul. I think so. He tended to wax a bit philosophical about it. Trying to talk himself more firmly into the idea of going ahead with it. And while he was doing this, I was wondering how many similar hang-ups we may have that makes it hard or impossible to use some of the ideas we may get. Here is this advanced culture, a forward-looking society, and yet an old obsession that probably dates back to primordial times has made it impossible for them to come up with the concept of medicine.'

'Our own history of medicine,' said Thomas, 'is not too dissimilar. We had to sweep away a lot of superstition and wrong thinking before we could get even a decent start in the healing art.'

'I suppose so,' said Martin. 'But, dammit, the whole thing makes me feel good. If Einstein goes ahead with it, and I think he will, it means we've been of some use. Like I said last night, we may be beginning to pay our dues. We aren't just Cub Scouts any longer. I had no idea, you see, of what was going on. The sneaky son-of-a-bitch was trying to steal the idea of medicine from me, bit by tiny bit.'

'I'd suspect we may be doing much the same thing on our part,'

said Thomas. 'We're handling some of those jokers out there far too gently, more than likely, than there is any need to. Going easy on them, afraid of doing something wrong and scaring them off. I would suspect this is because of our inferiority complex, brought about by the kind of company we're keeping. Get a few more deals like your medicine show under our belts and we'll no longer have it. We'll be right up there with the rest of them.'

'I hesitated to ask him,' said Martin, 'about why he was sticking with me. Like you say, I probably was afraid of scaring him off. But it bugged me, it had bugged me for a long time. So I thought, why not? why not be honest with him? And once I was honest with him, he decided to be honest with me. It does beat hell how things sometimes turn out.'

'I don't suppose you had much time to talk about FTL today. That's all right. Maybe a few days off may help. And now you'll feel less guilty at the time Einstein spends on it. You can bear down a little harder on him.'

'No time on FTL today at all,' said Martin. 'But you may be right. I've been doing some thinking about it. I talked with Mary Kay last night and she asked me if I stuck to hard fact all the time or if I paid some attention to my feelings, how I felt about it. I suppose she was trying to say hunches and not quite making it. I told her my feelings played no part in it. I've never let them play a part. I've tried to stick to the pure science of it - if, in fact, there is any science in it. This afternoon I got to thinking about it and maybe I was wrong . . .'

'And?'

'You know, Paul, I may finally have a handle on this FTL business. Not for certain, but maybe. A new way to go. For the last several weeks, I've been telling myself time could be the key factor and that I should be paying more attention to it. Has this project ever held any talk with some of our aliens about time?'

'I think so. Ten or fifteen years ago. We still have the record. It was fairly inconclusive, but we have stacks of data.'

'Except in a superficial way,' said Martin, 'time can't play too much of a part in any equation, although in many problems it can be a fairly critical factor. If we knew more about time. I told myself, not as a physical, but as a mental factor in FTL, we might turn the trick. Tying a mental concept of time into the equation . . .'

'You think it might work?'

'Not now. Not any more. I have a hunch that time may be a variable, that it runs differently in different sectors of the universe, or differently in the minds of different intelligences. But there is something that would be a constant. Eternity would be a constant factor. It wouldn't vary; it would be the same everywhere.'

'My God, Jay, you aren't talking about . . .'

'Not about arriving at an understanding of it, but I think we might work out a way it could be used as a constant. I'm going to take a shot at it. With it in mind, some of the other factors may come clear.'

'But eternity, Jay. This business about the universe coming to an end.'

'Mary Kay told me something else last night. Her hunch of what might be left when the universe is gone.'

'I know. She was in just a while ago. She spilled it all on me.'

'And what did you say?'

'Christ, Jay, what could I say? I patted her on the shoulder and told her to stay in there pitching.'

'But if she's right, there'd be something beyond the end of the universe. There'd still be eternity. Maybe still infinity. Two constants. And room for something else to happen.'

'You're getting me in beyond my depth, Jay.'

'Maybe I'm beyond my depth, too. But it's a new approach.

Maybe it can be handled. Tell Russell and Brown, when they start hassling you again, that we're going at it from a fresh angle.'

Thomas sat a long time at the desk after Martin had left.

Last night, he thought, Allen had been no help when he'd talked with him. All the same old platitudes: don't worry, sit on it, hang in there

tight, make a decision only when you have to. And this afternoon he, himself, had been no help when Jay and Mary Kay had sat across the desk from him. Stay in there pitching, he'd told Mary Kay.

These are special people, he had told Allen. He had been right, of course. They were special, but how special? How far beyond the ordinary run of mankind? Dime store clerks and car hops and raw farm boys. But what happened to them when they ventured out among the stars and made contacts with the intelligences who dwelt on planets orbiting distant suns? Allen had said, or had it been he? that all that came through from the star-flung party line was not recorded in the memory banks - the pain, the sorrow, the doubt, the hope, the fear, the prejudices, the biases, and what else? Something beyond all human experience? Something that was soaked up, that was absorbed into the fiber and the fabric of the human telepaths who listened, who chatted and gossiped with their neighbors strung across the galaxies. A factor, or factors, that made them slightly more than human or, perhaps, a great deal more than human.

Mary Kay, with her talk of a place that would still persist after the universe was gone, quite naturally was crazy. Jay, with his talk of using eternity as a constant factor, was insane as well. But crazy and insane, of course, only by human standards. And these people, these telepaths of his (perhaps, almost certainly, undeniably) had gone far beyond humanity.

A special people, a new breed, their humanity cross pollinated by the subtle intricacies of alien contact, the hope of humankind? Ambassadors to the universe? Industrial spies? Snoopers into places where man had little right to go? Explorers of the infinite?

Dammit, he thought, it made a man proud to be a member of the human race. Even if this special breed should finally become a race apart, they still stemmed from the same origins as all the other humans.

Might it be, he wondered, that in time some of the specialness would rub off on others such as he?

And, suddenly, without any thinking on it, without due consideration, without mulling it over, without using the slow, intricate, involved process of human thought, he arrived at faith. And was convinced, as well, that his faith was justified.

Time to go for broke, he told himself.

He reached over and punched the button for Evelyn.

'Get me Senator Brown,' he told her. 'No, I don't know where he is. Track him down, wherever he may be. I want to tell the old bastard that we're finally on the track for FTL.'

The Answers

I

THEY knew it when they stepped out of the ship and saw it. There was, of course, no way that they could have known it, or have been sure they knew it, for there was no way to know what one might be looking for. Yet they did know it for what it was, and three of them stood and looked at it and the fourth one floated and looked at it. And each of them, in his brain or heart or intuition, whatever you may name it, knew deep inside himself a strange conviction that here finally was the resting place, or one of the resting places, of that legendary fragment of the human race that millennia before had broken free of the chains of ordinary humans to make their way into the darkness of the outer galaxy. But whether they had fled from mediocrity or whether they had deserted or whether they had left for any one of a dozen other reasons was a thing that no one now might know, for the matter had become an academic question that had split into several cults of erudite belief and still was fiercely debated in a very learned manner.

In the minds of the four who looked, however, there was no shred of question that here before them lay the place that had been sought, in a more or less haphazard fashion, for a hundred thousand years. It was a place. One hesitated to call it a city, although it probably was a

city. It was a place of living and of learning and of working and it had many buildings, but the buildings had been made a part of the landscape and did not outrage the eye with their grossness or their disregard for the land they stood upon. There was greatness about the place-not the greatness of gigantic stones heaped on one another, nor the greatness of a bold and overwhelming architecture, nor even the greatness of indestructibility. For there was no massiveness of structure and the architecture seemed quite ordinary, and some of the buildings had fallen into disrepair and others were weathered into a mellowness that blended with the trees and grass of the hills on which they stood.

Still, there was a greatness in them, the greatness of humility and purpose and the greatness, too, of well-ordered life. Looking at them, one knew that he had been wrong in thinking this a city-that this was no city, but an extensive village, with all the connotations that were in the word.

But most of all there was humanness, the subtle touch that marked the buildings as those that had been planned by human minds and raised by human hands. You could not put your finger upon any single thing and say, this thing is human, for any one thing you put your finger on might have been built or achieved by another race. But when all those single things were rolled into the whole concept there could be no doubt that it was a human village.

Sentient beings had hunted for this place, had sought the clue that might lead them to the vanished segment of the race, and when they failed, some of.them had doubted there had been such a place, with the records that told of it often in dispute. There were those, too, who had said that it mattered little whether you found the missing fragment or not, since little that was of any value would come from a race so insignificant as the human race. What were the humans? they would ask you and would answer before you had a chance to speak. Gadgeteers, they said, gadgeteers who were singularly unstable. Great on gadgets, they would say, but with very little real intelligence.

It was, they would point out, only by the slightest margin of intelligence that they were ever accepted into the galactic brotherhood. And, these detractors would remind you, they had not improved much since. Still marvelous gadgeteers, of course, but strictly third-rate citizens who now quite rightly had been relegated to the backwash of the empire.

The place had been sought, and there had been many failures. It had been sought, but not consistently, for there were matters of much greater import than finding it. It was simply an amusing piece of galactic history, or myth, if you would rather. As a project, its discovery had never rated very high.

But here it was, spread out below the high ridge on which the ship had landed, and if any of them wondered why it had not been found before, there was a simple answer-there were just too many stars; you could not search them all.

"This is it," said the Dog, speaking in his mind, and he looked slantwise at the Human, wondering what the Human might be thinking, for, of all of them, the finding of this place must mean the most to him.

"I am glad we found it," said the Dog, speaking directly to the Human, and the Human caught the nuances of the thought, the closeness of the Dog and his great compassion and his brotherhood.

"Now we shall know," the Spider said, and each of them knew, without actually saying so, that now they'd know if these humans were any different from the other humans, or if they were just the same old humdrum race.

"They were mutants," said the Globe, "or they were supposed to be."

The Human stood there, saying nothing, just looking at the place. "If we'd tried to find it," said the Dog, "we never would have done it."

"We can't spend much time," the Spider told them. "Just a quick survey, then there's this other business."

"The point is," said the Globe, "we know now that it exists and where it is. They will send experts out to investigate."

"We stumbled on it," said the Human, half in wonderment. "We just stumbled on it."

The Spider made a thought that sounded like a chuckle and the Human said no more.

"It's deserted," said the Globe. "They have run away again."

"They may be decadent," said the Spider. "We may find what's left of them huddled in some corner, wondering what it's all about, loaded down with legends and with crazy superstitions."

"I don't think so," said the Dog.

"We can't spend much time," the Spider said again.

"We should spend no time at all," the Globe told them. "We were not sent out to find this place. We have no business letting it delay us."

"Since we've found it," said the Dog, "it would be a shame to go away and leave it, just like that."

"Then let's get at it," said the Spider. "Let's break out the robots and the ground car."

"If you don't mind," the Human said, "I think that I will walk. The rest of you go ahead. I'll just walk down and take a look around." "I'll go with you," said the Dog.

"I thank you," said the Human, "but there really is no need." So they let him go alone.

The three of them stayed on the ridge top and watched him walk down the hill toward the silent buildings.

Then they went to activate the robots.

The sun was setting when they returned, and the Human was waiting for them, squatting on the ridge, staring at the village.

He did not ask them what they had found. It was almost as if he knew, although he could not have found the answer by himself, just walking around.

They told him.

The Dog was kind about it. "It's strange," he said. "There is no evidence of any great development. No hint of anything unusual. In

fact, you might guess that they had retrogressed. There are no great engines, no hint of any mechanical ability."

"There are gadgets," said the Human. "Gadgets of comfort and convenience. That is all I saw."

"That is all there is," the Spider said.

"There are no humans," said the Globe. "No life of any kind. No intelligence."

"The experts," said the Dog, "may find something when they come."

"I doubt it," said the Spider.

The Human turned his head away from the village and looked at his three companions. The Dog was sorry, of course, that they had found so little, sorry that the little they had found had been so negative. The Dog was sorry because he still held within himself some measure of racial memory and of loyalty. The old associations with the human race had been wiped away millennia ago, but the heritage still held, the old heritage of sympathy with and for the being that had walked with his ancestors so understandingly.

The Spider was almost pleased about it, pleased that he had found no evidence of greatness, that this last vestige of vanity that might be held by humans now would be dashed forever and the race must now slink back into its corner and stay there, watching with furtive eyes the greatness of the Spiders and the other races.

The Globe didn't care. As he floated there, at head level with the Spider and the Dog, it meant little to him whether humans might be proud or humble. Nothing mattered to the Globe except that certain plans went forward, that certains goals were reached, that progress could be measured. Already the Globe had written off this village, already he had erased the story of the mutant humans as a factor that might affect progress, one way or another.

"I think," the Human said, "that I will stay out here for a while. That is, if you don't mind."

"We don't mind," the Globe told him.

"It will be getting dark," the Spider said.

"There'll be stars," the Human said. "There may even be a moon. Did you notice if there was a moon?"

"No," the Spider said.

"We'll be leaving soon," the Dog said to the Human. "I will come out and tell you when we have to leave."

There were stars, of course. They came out when the last flush of the sun still flamed along the west. First there were but a few of the brighter ones and then there were more, and finally the entire heaven was a network of unfamiliar stars. But there was no moon. Or, if there was one, it did not show itself.

Chill crept across the ridge and the Human found some sticks of wood lying about, dead branches and shriveled bushes and other wood that looked as if it might at one time have been milled and worked, and built himself a fire. It was a small fire but it flamed brightly in the darkness, and he huddled close against it, more for its companionship than for any heat it gave.

He sat beside it and looked down upon the village and told himself there was something wrong. The greatness of the human race, he told himself, could not have gone so utterly to seed. He was lonely, lonely with a throat-aching loneliness that was more than the loneliness of an alien planet and a chilly ridge and unfamiliar stars. He was lonely for the hope that once had glowed so brightly, for the promise that had gone like dust into nothingness before a morning wind, for a race that huddled in its gadgetry in the backwash of the empire.

Not an empire of humanity, but an empire of Globes and Spiders, of Dogs and other things for which there was scarcely a description.

There was more to the human race than gadgetry. There was destiny somewhere and the gadgetry was simply the means to bridge the time until that destiny should become apparent. In a fight for survival, he told himself, gadgetry might be the expedient, but it could not be the answer; it could not be the sum total, the final jotting down of any group of beings.

The Dog came and stood beside him without saying anything. He simply stood there and looked down with the Human at the quiet village that had been quiet so long, and the firelight flamed along his coat, and he was a thing of beauty with a certain inherent wildness still existing in him.

Finally the Dog broke the silence that hung above the world and seemed a part of it.

"The fire is nice," he said. "I seldom have a fire."

"The fire was first," the Human said. "The first step up. Fire is a symbol to me."

"I have symbols, too," the Dog said, gravely. "Even the Spider has some symbols. But the Globe has none."

"I feel sorry for the Globe," the Human said.

"Don't let your pity wear you down," the Dog told him. "The Globe feels sorry for you. He is sorry for all of us, for everything that is not a Globe."

"Once my people were sorry like that, too," the Human said. "But not any more."

"It's time to go," the Dog said. "I know you would like to stay, but ..."

"I am staying," said the Human.

"You can't stay," the Dog told him.

"I am staying," the Human said. "I am just a Human and you can get along without me."

"I thought you would be staying," said the Dog. "Do you want me to go back and get your stuff?"

"If you would be so kind," the Human said. "I'd not like to go myself."

"The Globe will be angry," said the Dog.

"I know it."

"You will be demoted," said the Dog. "It will be a long time before you're allowed to go on a first class run again."

"I know all that."

"The Spider will say that all humans are crazy. He will say it in a very nasty way."

"I don't care," the Human said. "Somehow, I don't care."

"All right, then," said the Dog. "I will go and get your stuff. There are some books and your clothes and that little trunk of yours." "And food," the Human said.

"Yes," declared the Dog. "I would not have forgotten food."

After the ship was gone the Human picked up the bundles the Dog had brought, and, in addition to all the Human's food, the Human saw that the Dog had left him some of his own as well.

II

The people of the village had lived a simple and a comfortable life. Much of the comfort paraphernalia had broken down and all of it had long since ceased to operate, but it was not hard for one to figure out what each of the gadgets did or once had been designed to do.

They had had a love of beauty, for there still were ruins of their gardens left, and here and there one found a flower or a flowering shrub that once had been tended carefully for its color and its grace; but these things had been long forgotten and had lost the grandeur of their purpose, so that the beauty they now held was bitter-sweet and faded.

The people had been literate, for there were rows of books upon the shelves. The books went to dust when they were touched, and one could do no more than wonder at the magic words they held.

There were buildings which at one time might have been theaters and there were great forums where the populace might have gathered to hear the wisdom or the argument that was the topic of the day.

And even yet one could sense the peace and leisure, the order and the happiness that the place had once held.

There was no greatness. There were no mighty engines, nor the shops to make them. There were no launching platforms and no other hint that the dwellers in the village had ever dreamed of going to the stars, although they must have known about the stars since their ancestors had come from space. There were no defenses, and there were no great roads leading from the village into the outer planet.

One felt peace when he walked along the street, but it was a haunted peace, a peace that balanced on a knife's edge, and while one wished with all his heart that he could give way to it and live with it, one was afraid to do so for fear of what might happen.

The Human slept in the homes, clearing away the dust and the fallen debris, building tiny fires to keep him company. He sat outside, on the broken flagstones or the shattered bench, before he went to sleep, and stared up at the stars and thought how once those stars had made familiar patterns for a happy people. He wandered in the winding paths that were narrower now than they once had been and hunted for a clue, although he did not hunt too strenuously, for there was something here that said you should not hurry and you should not fret, for there was no purpose in it.

Here once had lain the hope of the human race, a mutant branch of that race that had been greater than the basic race. Here had been the hope of greatness and there was no greatness. Here were peace and comfort and intelligence and leisure, but nothing else that made itself apparent to the eye.

Although there must be something else, some lesson, some message, some purpose. The Human told himself again and again that this could not be a dead end, that it was more than some blind alley.

On the fifth day, in the center of the village, he found the building that was a little more ornate and somewhat more solidly built, although all the rest were solid enough for all conscience' sake. There were no windows and the single door was locked, and he knew at last that he had found the clue he had been hunting for.

He worked for three days to break into the building but there was no way that he could. On the fourth day he gave up and walked away, out of the village and across the hilts, looking for some thought or some idea that might gain him entry to the building. He walked across the hills as one will pace his study when he is at a loss for words, or take a turn in the garden to clear his head for thinking.

And that is how he found the people.

First of all, he saw the smoke coming from one of the hollows that branched down toward the valley where a river ran, a streak of gleaming silver against the green of pasture grass.

He walked cautiously, so that he would not be surprised, but, strangely, without the slightest fear, for there was something in this planet, something in the arching sky and the song of bird and the way the wind blew out of the west that told a man he had not a thing to fear.

Then he saw the house beneath the mighty trees. He saw the orchard and the trees bending with their fruit and heard the thoughts of people talking back and forth.

He walked down the hill toward the house, not hurrying, for suddenly it had come upon him that there was no need to hurry. And, just as suddenly, it seemed that he was coming home, although that was the strangest thing of all, for he had never known a home that resembled this.

They saw him coming when he strode down across the orchard, but they did not rise and come to meet him. They sat where they were and waited, as if he were already a friend of theirs and his coming were expected.

There was an old lady with snow-white hair and a prim, neat dress, its collar coming up high at her throat to hide the ravages of age upon the human body. But her face was beautiful, the restful beauty of the very old, who sit and rock and know their day is done and that their life is full and that it has been good.

There was a man of middle age or more, who sat beside the woman. The sun had burned his face and neck until they were almost black, and his hands were calloused and pock-marked with old scars and half crippled with heavy work. But upon his face, too, was a calmness which was an incomplete reflection of the face beside him, incomplete because it was not so deep and settled, because it could not as yet know the full comfort of old age.

The third one was a young woman and the Human saw the calmness in her, too. She looked back at him out of cool gray eyes and he saw that her face was curved and soft and that she was much younger than he had first thought.

He stopped at the gate and the man rose and came to where he waited.

"You're welcome, stranger," said the man. "We heard you coming since you stepped into the orchard."

"I have been at the village," the Human said. "I am just out for a walk."

"You are from outside?"

"Yes," the Human told him, "I am from outside. My name is David Grahame."

"Come in, David," said the man, opening the gate. "Come and rest with us. There will be food and we have an extra bed."

He walked along the garden path with the man and came to the bench where the old lady sat.

"My name is Jed," the man said, "and this is my mother, Mary, and the other of us is my daughter Alice."

"So you finally came to us, young man," the old lady said to David.

She patted the bench with a fragile hand. "Here, sit down beside me and let us talk awhile. Jed has chores to do and Alice will have to cook the supper. But I am old and lazy and I only sit and talk."

Now that she talked, her eyes were brighter, but the calmness was still in them.

"We knew you would come someday," she said. "We knew someone would come. For surely those who are outside would hunt their mutant kin."

"We found you," David said, "quite by accident." "We? There are others of you?"

"The others went away. They were not human and they were not interested."

"But you stayed," she said. "You thought there would be things to

find. Great secrets to he learned."

"I stayed," said David, "because I had to stay."

"But the secrets? The glory and the power?"

David shook his head. "I don't think I thought of that. Not of power and glory. But there must be something else. You sense it walking in the village and looking at the homes. You sense a certain truth."

"Truth," the old lady said. "Yes, we found the Truth." And the way she said it Truth was capitalized.

He looked quickly at her and she sensed the unspoken, unguarded question that flicked across his mind.

"No," she told him, "not religion. Just Truth. The plain and simple Truth."

He almost believed her, for there was a quiet conviction in the way she said it, a deep and solid surety.

"The truth of what?" he asked.

"Why, Truth," the old lady said. "Just Truth."

III

It would be, of course, something more than a simple truth. It would have nothing to do with machines, and it would concern neither power nor glory. It would be an inner truth, a mental or a spiritual or a psychological truth that would have a deep and abiding meaning, the sort of truth that men had followed for years and even followed yet in the wish-worlds of their own creation.

The Human lay in the bed close beneath the roof and listened to the night wind that blew itself a lullaby along the eaves and shingles. The house was quiet and the world was quiet except for the singing wind. The world was quiet, and David Grahame could imagine, lying there, how the galaxy would gradually grow quiet under the magic and the spell of what these human-folk had found.

It must be great, he thought, this truth of theirs. It must be powerful and imagination-snaring and all-answering to send them back like this, to separate them from the striving of the galaxy and send them back to this pastoral life of achieved tranquillity in this alien valley, to

make them grub the soil for food and cut the trees for warmth, to make them content with the little that they have.

To get along with that little, they must have much of something else, some deep inner conviction, some mystic inner knowledge that has spelled out to them a meaning to their lives, to the mere fact and living of their lives, that no one else can have.

He lay on the bed and pulled the covers up more comfortably about him and hugged himself with inner satisfaction.

Man cowered in one corner of the galactic empire, a maker of gadgets, tolerated only because he was a maker of gadgets and because the other races never could be sure what he might come up with next; so they tolerated him and threw him crumbs enough to keep him friendly but wasted scant courtesy upon him.

Now, finally, Man had something that would win him a place in the respect and the dignity of the galaxy. For a truth is a thing to be respected.

Peace came to him and he would not let it in but fought against it so that he could think, so that he could speculate, imagining first that this must be the truth that the mutant race had found, then abandoning that idea for one that was even better.

Finally the lullabying wind and the sense of peace and the tiredness of his body prevailed against him and he slept.

The last thought that he had was, I must ask them. I must find out.

But it was days before he asked them, for he sensed that they were watching, and he knew that they wondered if he could be trusted with the truth and if he was worthy of it.

He wished to stay; but for politeness' sake he said that he must go and raised no great objection when they said that he must stay. It was as if each one of them knew this was a racial ritual that must be observed, and all were glad, once it was over and done with.

He worked in the fields with Jed and got to know the neighbors up and down the valley; he sat long evenings talking with Jed and his mother and the daughter and with the other valley folk who dropped in

to pass a word or two.

He had expected that they would ask him questions, but they did not; it was almost as if they didn't care, as if they so loved this valley where they lived that they did not even think about the teeming galaxy their far ancestors had left behind to seek here on this world a destiny that was better than common human destiny.

He did not ask them questions, either, for he felt them watching him, and he was afraid that questions would send them fleeing from the strangeness of him.

But he was not a stranger. It took him only a day or two to know that he could be one of them, and so he made himself become one of them and sat for long hours and talked of common gossip that ran up and down the valley, and it was all kindly gossip. He learned many things-that there were other valleys where other people lived, that the silent, deserted village was something they did not fret about, although each of them seemed to know exactly what it was, that they had no ambition and no hope beyond this life of theirs, and all were well content.

He grew content himself, content with the rose-gray mornings, with the dignity of labor, with the pride of growing things. But even as he grew content, he knew he could not be content, that he must find the truth they had found and must carry that truth back to the wait- ing galaxy. Before long a ship would be coming out to explore the village and to study it and before the ship arrived he must know the answer; when the ship arrived he must be standing on the ridge above the village to tell them what he'd found.

One day Jed asked him, "You will be staying with us?"

David shook his head. "I have to go back, Jed. I would like to stay, but I must go back."

Jed spoke slowly, calmly. "You want the Truth? That's it?" "If you will give it to me," David said.

"It is yours to have," said Jed. "You will not take it back."

That night Jed said to his daughter, "Alice, teach David how to read

our writing. It is time he knew."

In the corner by the fireplace the old lady sat rocking in her chair. "Aye," she said. "It is time he read the Truth."

IV

The key had come by special messenger from its custodian five valleys distant, and now Jed held it in his hand and slid it into the lock of the door in the building that stood in the center of the old, quiet, long-deserted village.

"This is the first time," Jed said, "that the door has been opened except for the ritualistic reading. Each hundred years the door is opened and the Truth is read so that those who are then living may know that it is so."

He turned the key and David heard the click of the tumblers turning in the lock.

"That way," said Jed, "we keep it actual fact. We do not allow it to become a myth.

"It is," he said, "too important a thing to become a myth."

Jed turned the latch and the door swung open just an inch or two.

"I said ritualistic reading," he said, "and perhaps that is not quite right. There is no ritual to it. Three persons are chosen and they come here on the appointed day and each of them reads the Truth and then they go back as living witnesses. There is no more ceremony than there is with you and me."

"It is good of you to do this for me," David said.

"We would do the same for any of our people who should doubt the Truth," said Jed. "We are a very simple people and we do not believe in red tape or rules. All we do is live.

"In just a little while," he said, "you will understand why we are simple people."

He swung the door wide open and stepped to one side so that

David might walk in ahead of him. The place was one large room and it was neat and orderly. There was some dust, but not very much.

Half the room was filled to three quarters of its height with a

machine that gleamed in the dull light that came from some source high in the roof.

"This is our machine," said Jed.

And so it was gadgetry, after all. It was another machine, perhaps a cleverer and sleeker machine, but it was still a gadget and the human race were still gadgeteers.

"Doubtless you wondered why you found no machines," said Jed. "The answer is that there is only one, and this is it." "Just one machine!"

"It is an answerer," said Jed. "A logic. With this machine, there is no need of any others."

"You mean it answers questions?"

"It did at one time," said Jed. "I presume it still would if there were any of us who knew how to operate it. But there is no need of asking further questions."

"You can depend on it?" asked David. "That is, you can be sure that it tells the truth?"

"My son," Jed said soberly, "our ancestors spent thousands of years making sure that it would tell the truth. They did nothing else. It was not only the life work of each trained technician, but the life work of the race. And when they were sure that it would know and tell the truth, when they were certain that there could be no slightest error in the logic of its calculations, they asked two questions of it."

"Two questions?"

"Two questions," Jed said. "And they found the Truth." "And the Truth?"

"The Truth," Jed said, "is here for you to read. Just as it came out those centuries ago."

He led the way to a table that stood in front of one panel of the great machine. There were two tapes upon the table, lying side by side. The tapes were covered by some sort of transparent preservative.

"The first question," said Jed, "was this: `What is the purpose of the universe?' Now read the top tape, for that is the answer."

David bent above the table and the answer was upon the tape:

The universe has no purpose. The universe just happened.

"And the second question . . ." said Jed, but there was no need for him to finish, for what the question had been was implicit in the wording of the second tape:

Life has no significance. Life is an accident.

"And that," said Jed, "is the Truth we found. That is why we are a simple people."

David lifted stricken eyes and looked at Jed, the descendant of that mutant race that was to have brought power and glory, respect and dignity, to the gadgeteering humans.

"I am sorry, son," said Jed. "That is all there is."

They walked out of the room, and Jed locked the door and put the key into his pocket.

"They'll be coming soon," said Jed, "the ones who will be sent out to explore the village. I suppose you will be waiting for them?" David shook his head. "Let's go back home," he said.

The Thing in the Stone

1

He walked the hills and knew what the hills had seen through geologic time. He listened to the stars and spelled out what the stars were saying. He had found the creature that lay imprisoned in the stone. He had climbed the tree that in other days had been climbed by homing wildcats to reach the den gouged by time and weather out of the cliff's sheer face. He lived alone on a worn-out farm perched on a high and narrow ridge that overlooked the confluence of two rivers. And his next-door neighbor, a most ill-favored man, drove to the county seat, thirty miles away, to tell the sheriff that this reader of the hills, this listener to the stars was a chicken thief.

The sheriff dropped by within a week or so and walked across the

yard to where the man was sitting in a rocking chair on a porch that faced the river hills. The sheriff came to a halt at the foot of the stairs that ran up to the porch.

'I'm Sheriff Harley Shepherd,' he said. 'I was just driving by. Been some years since I been out in this neck of the woods. You are new here, aren't you?'

The man rose to his feet and gestured at another chair. 'Been here three years or so,' he said. 'The name is Wallace Daniels. Come up and sit with me.'

The sheriff climbed the stairs and the two shook hands, then sat down in the chairs.

'You don't farm the place,' the sheriff said.

The weed-grown fields came up to the fence that hemmed in the yard.

Daniels shook his head. 'Subsistence farming, if you can call it that. A few chickens for eggs. A couple of cows for milk and butter. Some hogs for meat -- the neighbors help me butcher. A garden of course, but that's about the story.'

'Just as well,' the sheriff said. 'The place is all played out. Old Amos Williams, he let it go to ruin. He never was no farmer.'

'The land is resting now,' said Daniels. 'Give it ten years -- twenty might be better -- and it will be ready once again. The only things it's good for now are the rabbits and the woodchucks and the meadow mice. A lot of birds, of course. I've got the finest covey of quail a man has ever seen.'

'Used to be good squirrel country,' said the sheriff. 'Coon, too. I suppose you still have coon. You have a hunter, Mr. Daniels?'

'I don't own a gun,' said Daniels.

The sheriff settled deeply into the chair, rocking gently.

'Pretty country out here,' he declared. 'Especially with the leaves turning colors. A lot of hardwood and they are colorful. Rough as hell, of course, this land of yours. Straight up and down, the most of it. But pretty.'

'It's old country,' Daniels said. 'The last sea retreated from this area more than four hundred million years ago. It has stood as dry land since the end of the Silurian. Unless you go up north, on to the Canadian Shield, there aren't many places in this country you can find as old as this.'

'You a geologist, Mr. Daniels?'

'Not really. Interested, is all. The rankest amateur. I need something to fill my time and I do a lot of hiking, scrambling up and down these hills. And you can't do that without coming face to face with a lot of geology. I got interested. Found some fossil brachiopods and got to wondering about them. Sent off for some books and read up on them. One thing led to another and -- '

'Brachiopods? Would they be dinosaurs, or what? I never knew there were dinosaurs out this way.'

'Not dinosaurs,' said Daniels. 'Earlier than dinosaurs, at least the ones I found. They're small. Something like clams or oysters. But the shells are hinged in a different sort of way. These were old ones, extinct millions of years ago. But we still have a few brachiopods living now. Not too many of them.'

'It must be interesting.'

'I find it so,' said Daniels.

'You knew old Amos Williams?'

'No. He was dead before I came here. Bought the land from the bank that was settling his estate.'

'Queer old coot,' the sheriff said. 'Fought with all his neighbors. Especially with Ben Adams. Him and Ben had a line fence feud going on for years. Ben said Amos refused to keep up the fence. Amos claimed Ben knocked it down and then sort of, careless-like, hazed his cattle over into Amos's hayfield. How you get along with Ben?'

'All right,' Daniels said. 'No trouble. I scarcely know the man.'

'Ben don't do much farming, either,' said the sheriff. Hunts and fishes, hunts ginseng, does some trapping in the winter. Prospects for minerals now and then.'

'There are minerals in these hills,' said Daniels. 'Lead and zinc. But it would cost more to get it out than it would be worth. At present prices, that is.'

'Ben always has some scheme cooking.' said the sheriff. 'Always off on some wild goose chase. And he's a pure pugnacious man. Always has his nose out of joint about something. Always on the prod for trouble. Bad man to have for an enemy. Was in the other day to say someone's been lifting a hen or two of his. You haven't been missing any, have you?'

Daniels grinned. 'There's a fox that levies a sort of tribute on the coop every now and then. I don't begrudge them to him.'

'Funny thing,' the sheriff said. 'There ain't nothing can rile up a farmer like a little chicken stealing. It don't amount to shucks, of course, but they get real hostile at it.'

'If Ben has been losing chickens,' Daniels said, 'more than likely the culprit is my fox.'

'Your fox? You talk as if you own him.'

'Of course I don't. No one owns a fox. But he lives in these hills with me. I figure we are neighbours. I see him every now and then and watch him. Maybe that means I own a piece of him. Although I wouldn't be surprised if he watches me more than I watch him. He moves quicker than I do.'

The sheriff heaved himself out of the chair.

'I hate to go,' he said. 'I declare it has been restful sitting here and talking with you and looking at the hills. You look at them a lot, I take it.'

'Quite a lot,' said Daniels.

He sat on the porch and watched the sheriff's car top the rise far down the ridge and disappear from sight.

What had it all been about? he wondered. The sheriff hadn't just happened to be passing by. He'd been on an errand. All this aimless, friendly talk had not been for nothing and in the course of it he'd managed to ask lots of questions.

Something about Ben Adams, maybe? Except there wasn't too much against Adams except he was bone-lazy. Lazy in a weasely sort of way. Maybe the sheriff had got wind of Adams' off-and-on moonshining operation and was out to do some checking, hoping that some neighbor might misspeak himself. None of them would, of course, for it was none of their business, really, and the moonshining had built up no nuisance value. What little liquor Ben might make didn't amount to much. He was too lazy for anything he did to amount to much.

From far down the hill he heard the tinkle of a bell. The two cows were finally heading home. It must be much later, Daniels told himself, than he had thought. Not that he paid much attention to what time it was. He hadn't for long months on end, ever since he'd smashed his watch when he'd fallen off the ledge. He had never bothered to have the watch fixed. He didn't need a watch. There was a battered old alarm clock in the kitchen but it was an erratic piece of mechanism and not to be relied upon. He paid slight attention to it.

In a little while, he thought, he'd have to rouse himself and go and do the chores -- milk the cows, feed the hogs and chickens, gather up the eggs. Since the garden had been laid by there hadn't been much to do. One of these days he'd have to bring in the squashes and store them in the cellar and there were those three or four big pumpkins he'd have to lug down the hollow to the Perkins kids, so they'd have them in time to make jack-o-lanterns for Halloween. He wondered if he should carve out the faces himself or if the kids would rather do it on their own.

But the cows were still quite a distance away and he still had time. He sat easy in his chair and stared across the hills.

And they began to shift and change as he stared.

When he had first seen it, the phenomenon had scared him silly. But now he was used to it.

As he watched, the hills changed into different ones. Different vegetation and strange life stirred on them.

He saw dinosaurs this time. A herd of them, not very big ones. Middle Triassic, more than likely. And this time it was only a distant view -- he himself was not to become involved. He would only see, from a distance, what ancient time was like and would not be thrust into the middle of it as most often was the case.

He was glad. There were chores to do.

Watching, he wondered once again what more he could do. It was not the dinosaurs that concerned him, nor the earlier amphibians, nor all the other creatures that moved in time about the hills.

What disturbed him was that other being that lay buried deep beneath the Platteville limestone.

Someone else should know about it. The knowledge of it should be kept alive so that in the days to come -- perhaps in another hundred years -- when man's technology had reached the point where it was possible to cope with such a problem, something could be done to contact -- and perhaps to free -- the dweller in the stone.

There would be a record, of course, a written record. He would see to that. Already that record was in progress -- a week by week (at times a day to day) account of what he had seen, heard and learned. Three large record books now were filled with his careful writing and another one was well started. All written down as honestly and as carefully and as objectively as he could bring himself to do it.

But who would believe what he had written? More to the point, who would bother to look at it? More than likely the books would gather dust on some hidden shelf until the end of time with no human hand ever laid upon them. And even if someone, in some future time, should take them down and read them, first blowing away the accumulated dust, would he or she be likely to believe?

The answer lay clear. He must convince someone. Words written by a man long dead -- and by a man of no reputation -- could be easily dismissed as the product of a neurotic mind. But if some scientist of solid reputation could be made to listen, could be made to endorse the record, the events that paraded across the hills and lay

within them could stand on solid ground, worthy of full investigation at some future date.

A biologist? Or a neuropsychiatrist? Or a paleontologist?

Perhaps it didn't matter what branch of science the man was in. Just so he'd listen without laughter. It was most important that he listen without laughter.

Sitting on the porch, staring at the hills dotted with grazing dinosaurs, the listener to the stars remembered the time he had gone to see the paleontologist.

'Ben,' the sheriff said. 'you're way out in left field. That Daniels fellow wouldn't steal no chickens. He's got chickens of his own.'

'The question is,' said Adams, 'how did he get them chickens?'

'That makes no sense,' the sheriff said. 'He's a gentleman. You can tell that just by talking with him. An educated gentleman.'

'If he's a gentleman,' asked Adams, 'what's he doing out here? This ain't no place for gentlemen. He showed up two or three years ago and moved out to this place. Since that day he hasn't done a tap of work. All he does is wander up and down the hills.'

'He's a geologist,' said the sheriff. 'Or anyway interested in geology. A sort of hobby with him. He tells me he looks for fossils.'

Adams assumed the alert look of a dog that has sighted a rabbit. 'So that is it,' he said. 'I bet you it ain't fossils he is looking for.'

'No,' the sheriff said.

'He's looking for minerals,' said Adams. 'He's prospecting, that's what he's doing. These hills crawl with minerals. All you have to do is know where to look.'

'You've spent a lot of time looking,' observed the sheriff. 'I ain't no geologist. A geologist would have a big advantage. He would know rocks and such.'

'He didn't talk as if he were doing any prospecting. Just interested in the geology, is all. He found some fossil clams.'

'He might be looking for treasure caves,' said Adams. 'He might have a map or something.'

'You know damn well,' the sheriff said, 'there are no treasure caves.'

'There must be,' Adams insisted. 'The French and Spanish were here in the early days. They were great ones for treasure, the French and Spanish. Always running after mines. Always hiding things in caves. There was that cave over across the river where they found a skeleton in Spanish armour and the skeleton of a bear beside him, with a rusty sword stuck into where the bear's gizzard was.'

'That was just a story,' said the sheriff, disgusted. 'Some damn fool started it and there was nothing to it. Some people from the university came out and tried to run it down. It developed that there wasn't a word of truth in it.'

'But Daniels has been messing around with caves,' said Adams. 'I've seen him. He spends a lot of time in that cave down on Cat Den Point. Got to climb a tree to get to it.'

'You been watching him?'

'Sure I been watching him. He's up to something and I want to know what it is.'

'Just be sure he doesn't catch you doing it,' the sheriff said.

Adams chose to let the matter pass. 'Well, anyhow,' he said, 'if there aren't any treasure caves, there's a lot of lead and zinc. The man who finds it is about to make a million.'

'Not unless he can find the capital to back him,' the sheriff pointed out.

Adams dug at the ground with his heel. 'You think he's all right, do you?'

'He tells me he's been losing some chickens to a fox. More than likely that's what has been happening to yours.'

'If a fox is taking his chickens,' Adams asked, 'why don't he shoot it?'

'He isn't sore about it. He seems to think the fox has got a right to. He hasn't even got a gun.'

'Well, if he hasn't got a gun and doesn't care to hunt himself -- then why won't he let other people hunt? He won't let me and my boys on

his place with a gun. He has his place all posted. That seems to me to be un-neighborly. That's one of the things that makes it so hard to get along with him. We've always hunted on that place. Old Amos wasn't an easy man to get along with but he never cared if we did some hunting. We've always hunted all around here. No one ever minded. Seems to me hunting should be free. Seems right for a man to hunt wherever he's a mind to.'

Sitting on the bench on the hard-packed earth in front of the ramshackle house, the sheriff looked about him -- at the listlessly scratching chickens, at the scrawny hound sleeping in the shade, its hide twitching against the few remaining flies, at the clothes-line strung between two trees and loaded with drying clothes and dish towels, at the washtub balanced on its edge on a wash bench leaning against the side of the house.

Christ, he thought, the man should be able to find the time to put up a decent clothes-line and not just string a rope between two trees.

'Ben,' he said, 'you're just trying to stir up trouble. You resent Daniels, a man living on a farm who doesn't work at farming, and you're sore because he won't let you hunt his land. He's got a right to live anywhere he wants to and he's got a right not to let you hunt. I'd lay off him if I were you. You don't have to like him, you don't have to have anything to do with him -- but don't go around spreading fake accusations against the man. He could jerk you up in court for that.'

2

He had walked into the paleontologist's office and it had taken him a moment fully to see the man seated toward the back of the room at a cluttered desk. The entire place was cluttered. There were long tables covered with chunks of rock with embedded fossils, Scattered here and there were stacks of papers. The room was large and badly lighted. It was a dingy and depressing place.

'Doctor?' Daniels had asked. 'Are you Dr. Thorne?'

The man rose and deposited a pipe in a cluttered ashtray. He was big, burly, with graying hair that had a wild look to it. His face was

seamed and weather-beaten. When he moved he shuffled like a bear.

'You must be Daniels,' he said. 'Yes, I see you must be. I had you on my calendar for three o'clock. So glad you could come,"

His great paw engulfed Daniel's hand. He pointed to a chair beside the desk, sat down and retrieved his pipe from the overflowing tray, began packing it from a large canister that stood on the desk.

'Your letter said you wanted to see me about something important,' he said. 'But then that's what they all say. But there must have been something about your letter -- an urgency, a sincerity. I haven't the time, you understand, to see everyone who writes. All of them have found something, you see. What is it, Mr. Daniels, that you have found?'

Daniels said, 'Doctor, I don't quite know how to start what I have to say. Perhaps it would be best to tell you first that something had happened to my brain.'

Thorne was lighting his pipe. He talked around the stem. 'In such a case, perhaps I am not the man you should be talking to. There are other people -- '

'No, that's not what I mean,' said Daniels. 'I'm not seeking help. I am quite all right physically and mentally, too. About five years ago I was in a highway accident. My wife and daughter were killed and I was badly hurt and -- '

'I am sorry, Mr. Daniels.'

'Thank you -- but that is all in the past. It was rough for a time but I muddled through it. That's not what I'm here for. I told you I was badly hurt -- '

'Brain damage?'

'Only minor. Or so far as the medical findings are concerned. Very minor damage that seemed to clear up rather soon. The bad part was the crushed chest and punctured lung.'

'But you're all right now?'

'As good as new,' said Daniels. 'But since the accident my brain's been different. As if I had new senses. I see things, understand things

that seem impossible.'

'You mean you have hallucinations?'

'Not hallucinations. I am sure of that. I can see the past.'

'How do you mean -- see the past?'

'Let me try to tell you,' Daniels said. 'exactly how it started. Several years ago I bought an abandoned farm in south-western Wisconsin. A place to hole up in, a place to hide away. With my wife and daughter gone I still was recoiling from the world. I had got through the first brutal shock but I needed a place where I could lick my wounds. If this sounds like self-pity -- I don't mean it that way. I am trying to be objective about why I acted as I did, why I bought the farm.'

'Yes. I understand,' said Thorne. 'But I'm not entirely sure hiding was the wisest thing to do.'

'Perhaps not, but it seemed to me the answer. It has worked out rather well. I fell in love with the country. That part of Wisconsin is ancient land. It has stood uncovered by the sea for four hundred million years. For some reason it was not overridden by the Pleistocene glaciers. It has changed, of course, but only as the result of weathering. There have been no great geologic upheavals, no massive erosions -- nothing to disturb it.'

'Mr. Daniels,' said Thorne, somewhat testily, 'I don't quite see what this has to do -- '

'I'm sorry. I am just trying to lay the background for what I came to tell you. It came on rather slowly at first and I thought that I was crazy, that I was seeing things, that there had been more brain damage than had been apparent -- or that I was finally cracking up. I did a lot of walking in the hills, you see. The country is wild and rugged and beautiful -- a good place to be out in. The walking made me tired and I could sleep at night. But at times the hills changed. Only a little at first. Later on they changed more and finally they became places I had never seen before, that no one had ever seen before.'

Thorne scowled. 'You are trying to tell me they changed into the past.'

Daniels nodded. 'Strange vegetation, funny-looking trees. In the earlier times, of course, no grass at all. Underbrush of ferns and scouring rushes. Strange animals, strange things in the sky. Saber-tooth cats and mastodons, pterosaurs and uintatheres and -- '

'All at the same time?' Thorne asked, interrupting. 'All mixed up?'

'Not at all. The time periods I see seem to be true time periods. Nothing out of place. I didn't know at first -- but when I was able to convince myself that I was not hallucinating I sent away for books. I studied. I'll never be an expert, of course -- never a geologist or paleontologist -- but I learned enough to distinguish one period from another, to have some idea of what I was looking at.'

Thorne took his pipe out of his mouth and perched it in the ashtray. He ran a massive hand through his wild hair.

'It's unbelievable,' he said. 'It simply couldn't happen. You said all this business came on rather slowly?'

'To begin with it was hazy, the past foggily imposed upon the present, then the present would slowly fade and the past came in, real and solid. But it's different now. Once in a while there's a bit of flickering as the present gives way to the past -- but mostly it simply changes, as if at the snap of a finger. The present goes away and I'm standing in the past. The past is all around me. Nothing of the present is left.'

'But you aren't really in the past? Physically, I mean.'

'There are times when I'm not in it at all. I stand in the present and the distant hills or the river valley changes. But ordinarily it changes all around me, although the funny thing about it is that, as you say, I'm not really in it. I can see it and it seems real enough for me to walk around in it. I can walk over to a tree and put my hand out to feel it and the tree is there, But I seem to make no impact on the past. It's as if I were not there at all. The animals do not see me. I've walked up to within a few feet of dinosaurs. They can't see me or hear or smell me. If they had I'd have been dead a dozen times. It's as if I were walking through a three-dimensional movie. At first I worried a lot about the

surface differences that might exist. I'd wake up dreaming of going into the past and being buried up to my waist in a rise of ground that since has eroded away. But it doesn't work that way. I'm walking along in the present and then I'm walking in the past. It's as if a door were there and I stepped through it. I told you I don't really seem to be in the past -- but I'm not in the present, either. I tried to get some proof. I took a camera with me and shot a lot of pictures. When the films were developed there was nothing on them. Not the past -- but what is more important, not the present, either. If I had been hallucinating, the camera should have caught pictures of the present. But apparently there was nothing there for the camera to take. I thought maybe the camera failed or I had the wrong kind of film. So I tried several cameras and different types of film and nothing happened. I got no pictures. I tried bringing something back. I picked flowers, after there were flowers. I had no trouble picking them but when I came back to the present I was empty-handed. I tried to bring back other things as well. I thought maybe it was only live things, like flowers, that I couldn't bring, so I tried inorganic things -- like rocks -- but I never was able to bring anything back.'

'How about a sketch pad?'

'I thought of that but I never used one. I'm no good at sketching -- besides, I figured, what was the use? The pad would come back blank.'

'But you never tried.'

'No,' said Daniels. 'I never tried. Occasionally I do make sketches after I get back to the present. Not every time but sometimes. From memory. But, as I said, I'm not very good at sketching.'

'I don't know,' said Thorne. 'I don't really know. This all sounds incredible. But if there should be something to it -- Tell me, were you ever frightened? You seem quite calm and matter-of-fact about it now, but at first you must have been frightened.'

'At first,' said Daniels, 'I was petrified. Not only was I scared, physically scared -- frightened for my safety, frightened that I'd fallen

into a place from which I never could escape -- but also afraid that I'd gone insane. And there was the loneliness.'

'What do you mean -- loneliness?'

'Maybe that's not the right word. Out of place. I was where I had no right to be. Lost in a place where man had not as yet appeared and would not appear for millions of years. In a world so utterly alien that I wanted to hunker down and shiver. But I, not the place, was really the alien there. I still get some of that feeling every now and then. I know about it, of course, and am braced against it, but at times it still gets to me. I'm a stranger to the air and the light of that other time -- it's all imagination, of course.'

'Not necessarily,' said Thorne.

'But the greatest fear is gone now, entirely gone. The fear I was insane. I am convinced now.'

'How are you convinced? How could a man be convinced?'

'The animals. The creatures I see -- '

'You mean you recognize them from the illustrations in these books you have been reading.'

'No, not that. Not entirely that. Of course the pictures helped. But actually it's the other way around. Not the likeness, but the differences. You see, none of the creatures are exactly like the pictures in the books. Some of them not at all like them. Not like the reconstruction the paleontologists put together. If they had been I might still have thought they were hallucinations, that what I was seeing was influenced by what I'd seen or read. I could have been feeding my imagination on prior knowledge. But since that was not the case, it seemed logical to assume that what I see is real. How could I imagine that Tyrannosaurus had dewlaps all the colors of the rainbow? How could I imagine that some of the saber-tooths had tassels on their ears? How could anyone possibly imagine that the big thunder beasts of the Eocene had hides as colorful as giraffes?'

'Mr. Daniels,' said Thorne, 'I have great reservations about all that you have told me, Every fiber of my training rebels against it. I have a

feeling that I should waste no time on it. Undoubtedly, you believe what you have told me. You have the look of an honest man about you. Have you talked to any other men about this? Any other paleontologists or geologists? Perhaps a neuropsychiatrist?'

'No,' said Daniels. 'You're the only person, the only man I have talked with. And I haven't told you all of it. This is really all just background.'

'My God, man -- just background?'

'Yes, just background. You see, I also listen to the stars.' Thorne got up from his chair, began shuffling together a stack of papers. He retrieved the dead pipe from the ashtray and stuck it in his mouth.

His voice, when he spoke, was noncommittal.

'Thank you for coming in,' he said. 'It's been most interesting.'

3

And that was where he had made his mistake. Daniels told himself. He never should have mentioned listening to the stars. His interview had gone well until he had. Thorne had not believed him, of course, but he had been intrigued, would have listened further, might even have pursued the matter, although undoubtedly secretly and very cautiously.

At fault, Daniels knew, had been his obsession with the creature in the stone. The past was nothing -- it was the creature in the stone that was important and to tell of it, to explain it and how he knew that it was there, he must tell about his listening to the stars.

He should have known better, he told himself. He should have held his tongue. But here had been a man who, while doubting, still had been willing to listen without laughter, and in his thankfulness Daniels had spoken too much.

The wick of the oil lamp set upon the kitchen table guttered in the air currents that came in around the edges of the ill-fitting windows. A wind had risen after chores were done and now shook the house with gale-like blasts. On the far side of the room the fire in the wood-burning stove threw friendly, wavering flares of light across the floor

and the stovepipe, in response to the wind that swept the chimney top, made gurgling, sucking sounds.

Thorne had mentioned a neuropsychiatrist, Daniels remembered, and perhaps that was the kind of man he should have gone to see. Perhaps before he attempted to interest anyone in what he could see or hear, he should make an effort to find out why and how he could hear and see these things. A man who studied the working of the brain and mind might come up with new answers -- if answers were to be had.

Had that blow upon his head so rearranged, so shifted some process in his brain that he had gained new capabilities? Was it possible that his brain had been so jarred, so disarranged as to bring into play certain latent talents that possibly, in millennia to come, might have developed naturally by evolutionary means? Had the brain damage short-circuited evolution and given him -- and him alone -- these capabilities, these senses, perhaps a million years ahead of time?

It seemed -- well, not reasonable but one possible explanation. Still, a trained man might have some other explanation.

He pushed his chair back from the table and walked over to the stove. He used the lifter to raise the lid of the rickety old cook stove. The wood in the firebox had burned down to embers. Stooping, he picked up a stick of wood from the woodbox and fitted it in, added another smaller one and replaced the lid. One of these days soon, he told himself, he would have to get the furnace in shape for operation.

He went out to stand on the porch, looking toward the river hills. The wind whooped out of the north, whistling around the corners of the building and booming in the deep hollows that ran down to the river, but the sky was clear -- steely clear, wiped fresh by the wind and sprinkled with stars, their light shivering in the raging atmosphere.

Looking up at the stars, he wondered what they might be saying but he didn't try to listen. It took a lot of effort and concentration to listen to the stars. He had first listened to them on a night like this, standing out

here on the porch and wondering what they might be saying, wondering if the stars did talk among themselves. A foolish, vagrant thought, a wild, daydreaming sort of notion, but, voicing it, he had tried to listen, knowing even as he did that it was foolishness but glorying in his foolishness, telling himself how fortunate he was that he could afford to be so inane as to try to listen to the stars -- as a child might believe in Santa Claus or the Easter Rabbit. He'd listened and he'd heard and while he'd been astonished, there could be no doubt about it, no doubt at all that out there somewhere other beings were talking back and forth. He might have been listening in on a party line, he thought, but a party line that carried millions, perhaps billions, of long-distance conversations. Not words, of course, but something (thought, perhaps) that was as plain as words. Not all of it understandable -- much of it, as a matter of fact, not understandable -- possibly because his background and his learning gave him no basis for an understanding. He compared himself to an Australian aborigine listening to the conversation of a couple of nuclear physicists discussing a new theory.

Shortly after that, when he bad been exploring the shallow cave down on Cat Den Point, he had picked up his first indication of the creature buried in the stone. Perhaps, he thought, if he'd not listened to the stars, if he'd not known he could listen to the stars, if he'd not trained his mind by listening, he would not have heard the creature buried deep beneath the limestone.

He stood looking at the stars and listening to the wind and, far across the river, on a road that wound over the distant hills, he caught the faint glimmer of headlights as a car made its way through the night. The wind let up for a moment, as if gathering its strength to blow even harder and, in the tiny lull that existed before the wind took up again, he heard another sound -- the sound of an axe hitting wood, He listened carefully and the sound came again but so tossed about by the wind that he could not be sure of its direction.

He must be mistaken, he thought. No one would be out and

chopping on a night like this. Coon hunters might be the answer. Coon hunters at times chopped down a tree to dislodge a prey too well hidden to be spotted. The unsportsmanlike trick was one that Ben Adams and his overgrown, gangling sons might engage in. But this was no night for coon hunting. The wind would blow away scent and the dogs would be unable to track. Quiet nights were the best for hunting coon. And no one would be insane enough to cut down a tree on a night like this when a swirling wind might catch it and topple it back upon the cutters.

He listened to catch the sound again but the wind, recovering from its lull, was blowing harder than ever now and there was no chance of hearing any sound smaller than the wind.

The next day came in mild and gray, the wind no more than a whisper. Once in the night Daniels had awoken to hear it rattling the windows, pounding at the house and howling mournfully in the tangled hollows that lay above the river. But when he woke again all was quiet and faint light was graying the windows. Dressed and out of doors he found a land of peace -- the sky so overcast that there was no hint of sun, the air fresh, as if newly washed but heavy with the moist grayness that overlay the land. The autumn foliage that clothed the hills had taken on a richer luster than it had worn in the flooding autumn sunlight.

After chores and breakfast Daniels set out for the hills. As he went down the slope towards the head of the first hollow he found himself hoping that the geologic shift would not come about today. There were many times it didn't and there seemed to be no reason to its taking place or its failure to take place. He had tried at times to find some reason for it, had made careful notes of how he felt or what he did, even the course he took when he went for his daily walk, but he had found no pattern. It lay, of course, somewhere in his brain -- something triggered into operation his new capability. But the phenomenon was random and involuntary. He had no control of it, no conscious control, at least. At times he had tried to use it, to bring the

geologic shift about -- in each case had failed. Either he did not know how to go about it or it was truly random.

Today, he hoped, his capability would not exercise its option, for he wanted to walk in the hills when they had assumed one of their most attractive moods, filled with gentle melancholy, all their harshness softened by the grayness of the atmosphere, the trees standing silently like old and patient friends waiting for one's coming, the fallen leaves and forest mold so hushed footfalls made no sound.

He went down to the head of the hollow and sat on a fallen log beside a gushing spring that sent a stream of water tinkling down the boulder-strewn creek bed. Here, in May, in the pool below the spring, the marsh marigolds had bloomed and the sloping hillsides had been covered with the pastel of hepaticas. But now he saw no sign of either. The woods had battened down for winter. The summer and the autumn plants were either dead or dying, the drifting leaves interlocking on the forest floor to form cover against the ice and snow.

In this place, thought Daniels, a man walked with a season's ghosts. This was the way it had been for a million years or more, although not always. During many millions of years, in a time long gone, these hills and all the world had basked in an eternal summertime. And perhaps not a great deal more than ten thousand years before a mile-high wall of ice had reared up not too far to the north, perhaps close enough for a man who stood where his house now sat to have seen the faint line of blueness that would have been the top of that glacial barrier. But even then, although the mean temperature would have been lower, there had still been seasons.

Leaving the log, Daniels went on down the hollow, following the narrow path that looped along the hillside, a cow-path beaten down at a time when there had been more cows at pasture in these woods than the two that Daniels owned. Following it, Daniels noted, as he had many times before, the excellent engineering sense of a cow. Cows always chose the easiest grade in stamping out their paths.

He stopped barely beyond the huge white oak that stood at a bend

in the path, to have a look at the outsize jack-in-the-pulpit plant he had observed throughout the years. Its green-purple hood had withered away completely, leaving only the scarlet fruit cluster which in the bitter months ahead would serve as food for birds.

As the path continued, it plunged deeper between the hills and here the silence deepened and the grayness thickened until one's world became private.

There, across the stream bed, was the den. Its yellow maw gaped beneath a crippled, twisted cedar. There, in the spring, he had watched baby foxes play. From far down the hollow came the distant quacking of ducks upon the pond in the river valley. And up on the steep hillside loomed Cat Den Point, the den carved by slow-working wind and weather out of the sheer rock of the cliff.

But something was wrong.

Standing on the path and looking up the hill, he could sense the wrongness, although he could not at first tell exactly what it was. More of the cliff face was visible and something was missing. Suddenly he knew that the tree was no longer there -- the tree that for years had been climbed by homing wildcats heading for the den after a night of prowling and later by humans like himself who wished to seek out the wildcat's den. The cats, of course, were no longer there -- had not been there for many years. In the pioneer days they had been hunted almost to extermination because at times they had exhibited the poor judgment of bringing down a lamb. But the evidence of their occupancy of the cave could still be found by anyone who looked. Far back in the narrow recesses of the shallow cave tiny bones and the fragmented skulls of small mammals gave notice of food brought home by the wildcats for their young.

The tree had been old and gnarled and had stood, perhaps, for several centuries and there would have been no sense of anyone's cutting it down, for it had no value as lumber, twisted as it was. And in any case to get it out of the woods would have been impossible. Yet, last night, when he had stepped out on the porch, he had seemed to

hear in a lull in the wind the sound of chopping -- and today the tree was gone.

Unbelieving, he scrambled up the slope as swiftly as he could. In places the slope of the wild hillside slanted at an angle so close to forty-five degrees that he went on hands and knees, clawing himself upward, driven by an illogical fear that had to do with more than simply a missing tree.

For it was in the cat den that one could hear the creature buried in the stone.

He could recall the day he first had heard the creature and on that day he had not believed his senses. For he had been sure the sound came from his own imagination, was born of his walking with the dinosaurs and eavesdropping on the stars. It had not come the first time he had climbed the tree to reach the cave-that-was-a-den. He had been there several times before, finding a perverse satisfaction at discovering so unlikely a retreat. He would sit on the ledge that ran before the cave and stare over the froth of treetop foliage that clothed the plunging hillside, but afforded a glimpse of the pond that lay in the flood plain of the river. He could not see the river itself -- one must stand on higher ground to see the river.

He liked the cave and the ledge because it gave him seclusion, a place cut off from the world, where he still might see this restricted corner of the world but no one could see him. This same sense of being shut out from the world had appealed to the wildcats, he had told himself. And here, for them, not only was seclusion but safety -- and especially safety for their young. There was no way the den could be approached other than by climbing the tree.

He had first heard the creature when he had crawled into the deepest part of the shallow cave to marvel at the little heaps of bones and small shattered skulls where the wildcat kittens, perhaps a century before, had crouched and snarled at feast. Crouching where the baby wildcats once had crouched, he had felt the presence welling up at him, coming up to him from the depth of stone that lay far

beneath him. Only the presence at first, only the knowing that something was down there. He had been skeptical at first, later on believing. In time belief had become solid certainty.

He could record no words, of course, for he had never heard any actual sound. But the intelligence and the knowing came creeping through his body, through his fingers spread flat upon the stone floor of the cave, through his knees, which also pressed the stone. He absorbed it without hearing and the more he absorbed the more he was convinced that deep in the limestone, buried in one of the strata, an intelligence was trapped. And finally the time came when he could catch fragments of thoughts -- the edges of the _living_ in the sentience encysted in the rock.

What he heard he did not understand. This very lack of understanding was significant. If he had understood he would have put his discovery down to his imagination. As matters stood he had no knowledge that could possibly have served as a springboard to imagine the thing of which he was made aware. He caught an awareness of tangled life relationships which made no sense at all -- none of which could be understood, but which lay in tiny, tangled fragments of outrageous (yet simple) information no human mind could quite accept. And he was made to know the empty hollowness of distances so vast that the mind reeled at the very hint of them and of the naked emptiness in which those distances must lie. Even in his eavesdropping on the stars he had never experienced such devastating concepts of the other-where-and-when. There was other information, scraps and bits he sensed faintly that might fit into mankind's knowledge. But he never found enough to discover the proper slots for their insertion into the mass of mankind's knowledge. The greater part of what he sensed, however, was simply beyond his grasp and perhaps beyond the grasp of any human. But even so his mind would catch and hold it in all its incomprehensibility and it would lie there festering amid his human thoughts.

They were or it was, he knew, not trying to talk with him --

undoubtedly they (or it) did not know that such a thing as a man existed, let alone himself. But whether the creature (or creatures -- he found the collective singular easier) simply was thinking or might, in its loneliness, be talking to itself -- or whether it might be trying to communicate with something other than himself, he could not determine.

Thinking about it, sitting on the ledge before the cave, he had tried to make some logic of his find, had tried to find a way in which the creature's presence might be best explained. And while he could not be sure of it -- in fact, had no data whatsoever to bolster his belief -- he came to think that in some far geologic day when a shallow sea had lain upon this land, a ship from space had fallen into the sea to be buried deeply in the mud that in later millennia had hardened into limestone. In this manner the ship had become entrapped and so remained to this very day. He realized his reasoning held flaws -- for one thing, the pressure involved in the fashioning of the stone must have been so great as to have crushed and flattened any ship unless it should be made of some material far beyond the range of man's technology.

Accident, he wondered, or a way of hiding? Trapped or planned? He had no way of knowing and further speculation was ridiculous, based as it necessarily must be upon earlier assumptions that were entirely without support.

Scrambling up the hillside, he finally reached the point where he could see that, in all truth, the tree had been cut down. It had fallen downhill and slid for thirty feet or so before it came to rest, its branches entangled with the trunks of other trees which had slowed its plunge. The stump stood raw, the whiteness of its wood shining in the grayness of the day. A deep cut had been made in the downhill side of it and the final felling had been accomplished by a saw. Little piles of brownish sawdust lay beside the stump. A two-man saw, he thought.

From where Daniels stood the hill slanted down at an abrupt angle

but just ahead of him, just beyond the stump, was a curious mound that broke the hillside slope, In some earlier day, more than likely, great masses of stone had broken from the cliff face and piled up at its base, to be masked in time by the soil that came about from the forest litter. Atop the mound grew a clump of birch, their powdery white trunks looking like huddled ghosts against the darkness of the other trees.

The cutting of the tree, he told himself once again, had been a senseless piece of business. The tree was worthless and had served no particular purpose except as a road to reach the den, Had someone, he wondered, known that he used it to reach the den and cut it out of malice? Or had someone, perhaps, hidden something in the cave and then cut down the tree so there would be no way in which to reach it?

But who would hold him so much malice as to come out on a night raging with wind working by lantern light, risking his life, to cut down the tree? Ben Adams? Ben was sore because Daniels would not permit hunting on his land but surely that was no sufficient reason for this rather laborious piece of petty spite.

The other alternative -- that something hidden in the cave had caused the tree's destruction -- seemed more likely, although the very cutting of the tree would serve to advertize the strangeness of the place.

Daniels stood puzzled, shaking his head. Then he thought of a way to find out some answers. The day still was young and he had nothing else to do.

He started climbing up the hill, heading for his barn to pick up some rope.

4

There was nothing in the cave. It was exactly as it had been before. A few autumn leaves had blown into the far corners. Chips of weathered stone had fallen from the rocky overhang, tiny evidences of the endless process of erosion which had formed the cave and in a

few thousand years from now might wipe it out.

Standing on the narrow ledge in front of the cave, Daniels stared out across the valley and was surprised at the change of view that had resulted from the cutting of the tree. The angles of vision seemed somehow different and the hillside itself seemed changed. Startled, he examined the sweep of the slope closely and finally satisfied himself that all that had changed was his way of seeing it. He was seeing trees and contours that earlier had been masked.

His rope hung from the outcurving rock face that formed the roof of the cave. It was swaying gently in the wind and, watching it, Daniels recalled that earlier in the day he had felt no wind. But now one had sprung up from the west. Below him the treetops were bending to it.

He turned toward the west and felt the wind on his face and a breath of chill. The feel of the wind faintly disturbed him, rousing some atavistic warning that came down from the days when naked roaming bands of proto-men had turned, as he turned now, to sniff the coming weather. The wind might mean that a change in weather could be coming and perhaps he should clamber up the rope and head back for the farm.

But he felt a strange reluctance to leave. It had been often so, he recalled. For here was a wild sort of refuge which barred out the world and the little world that it let in was a different kind -- a more primal and more basic and less complicated world than the one he'd fled from.

A flight of mallards came winging up from the pond in the river valley arrowing above the treetops, banking and slanting up the long curve of the bluff and then, having cleared the bluff top, wheeling gracefully back toward the flyer. He watched them until they dipped down behind the trees that fringed the unseen river.

Now it was time to go. There was no use waiting longer. It had been a fool's errand in the first place; he had been wrong to let himself think something might be hidden in the cave.

He turned back to the rope and the rope was gone.

For a moment he stared stupidly at the point along the cliff face where the rope had hung, swaying in the breeze. Then he searched for some sign of it, although there was little area to search. The rope could have slid, perhaps, for a short distance along the edge of the overhanging mass of rock but it seemed incredible that it could have slid far enough to have vanished from his sight.

The rope was new, strong, and he had tied it securely to the oak tree on the bluff above the cliff, snugging it tightly around the trunk and testing the knot to make certain that it would not slip.

And now the rope was gone. There had to be a human hand in this. Someone had come along, seen the rope and quietly drawn it up and now was crouched on the bluff above him, waiting for his frightened outburst when he found himself stranded. It was the sort of crude practical joke than any number of people in the community might believe to be the height of humor. The thing to do, of course, was to pay no attention, to remain quiet and wait until the joke would pall upon the jokester.

So he hunkered down upon the ledge and waited. Ten minutes, he told himself, or at least fifteen, would wear out the patience of the jokester. Then the rope would come down and he could climb up and go back to the house. Depending upon who the joker might turn out to be, he'd take him home and pour a drink for him and the two of them, sitting in the kitchen, would have a laugh together.

He found that he was hunching his shoulders against the wind, which seemed to have a sharper bite than when he first had noticed it. It was shifting from the west to north and that was no good.

Squatting on the ledge, he noticed that beads of moisture had gathered upon his jacket sleeve -- not a result of rain, exactly, but of driven mist. If the temperature should drop a bit the weather might turn nasty.

He waited, huddled, listening for a sound -- a scuffling of feet through leaves, the snap of broken brush -- that would betray the presence of someone on the clifftop. But there was no sound at all.

The day was muffled. Even the branches of the trees beneath his perch, swaying in the wind, swayed without their usual creaks and groans.

Fifteen minutes must have passed and there had been no sound from atop the cliff. The wind had increased somewhat and when he twisted his head to one side to try to look up he could feel the soft slash of the driving mist against his cheek.

He could keep silent no longer in hope of waiting out the jokester. He sensed, in a sudden surge of panic, that time was running out on him.

'Hey, up there -- ' he shouted.

He waited and there was no response.

He shouted again, more loudly this time.

Ordinarily the cliff across the hollow should have bounced back echoes. But now there were no echoes and his shout seemed dampened, as if this wild place had erected some sort of fence to hem him in.

He shouted again and the misty world took his voice and swallowed it.

A hissing sound started. Daniels saw it was caused by tiny pellets of ice streaming through the branches of the trees. From one breath to another the driven mist had turned to ice.

He walked back and forth on the ledge in front of the cave, twenty feet at most, looking for some way of escape. The ledge went out into space and then sheered off. The slanting projection of rock came down from above. He was neatly trapped.

He moved back into the cave and hunkered down. Here he was protected from the wind and he felt, even through his rising panic, a certain sense of snugness. The cave was not yet cold. But the temperature must be dropping and dropping rather swiftly or the mist would not have turned to ice. He wore a light jacket and could not make a fire. He did not smoke and never carried matches.

For the first time he faced the real seriousness of his position. It

might be days before anyone noticed he was missing. He had few visitors and no one ever paid too much attention to him. Even if someone should find that he was missing and a hunt for him was launched, what were the chances that he would be found? Who would think to look in this hidden cave? How long, he wondered, could a man survive in cold and hunger?

If he could not get out of here, and soon, what about his livestock? The cows would be heading home from pasture, seeking shelter from the storm, and there would be no one there to let them into the barn. If they were not milked for a day or two they would be tormented by swollen udders. The hogs and chickens would go unfed. A man, he thought, had no right to take the kind of chance he had taken when so many living creatures were dependent on him.

He crawled farther back into the cave and stretched himself out on his belly, wedging himself into its deepest recess, an ear laid against the stone.

The creature still was there -- of course it still was there. It was trapped even more securely than himself, held down by, perhaps, several hundred feet of solid rock, which had been built up most deliberately through many millions of years.

It was remembering again. In its mind was another place and, while part of that flow of memory was blurred and wavy, the rest was starkly clear. A great dark plain of rock, one great slab of rock, ran to a far horizon and above that far horizon a reddish sun came up and limned against the great red ball of rising sun was a hinted structure -- an irregularity of the horizon that suggested a place. A castle, perhaps, or a city or a great cliff dwelling -- it was hard to make out what it was or to be absolutely sure that it was anything at all.

Home? Was that black expanse of rock the spaceport of the old home planet? Or might it be only a place the creature had visited before it had come to Earth? A place so fantastic, perhaps, that it lingered in the mind.

Other things mixed into the memory, sensory symbols that might

have applied to personalities, life forms, smells, tastes.

Although he could be wrong, Daniels knew, in supplying this entrapped creature with human sensory perceptions, these human sensory perceptions were the only ones he knew about.

And now, listening in on the memory of that flat black expanse of rock and imagining the rising sun which outlined the structure of the far horizon, Daniels did something he had never tried to do before. He tried to talk back to the buried creature, tried to let it know that someone was listening and had heard, that it was not as lonely and as isolated as it might have thought it was.

He did not talk with his tongue -- that would have been a senseless thing to do. Sound could never carry through those many feet of stone. He talked with his mind instead.

Hello, down there, he said. _This is a friend of yours. I've been listening to you for a long, long time and I hope that you can hear me. If you can, let us talk together. Let me try to make you understand about myself and the world I live in and you tell me about yourself and the kind of world you lived in and how you came to be where you are and if there is anything I can do for you, any help that I can give._

He said that much and no more. Having spoken, he continued lying with his ear against the hard cave floor, listening to find out if the creature might have heard him. But the creature apparently had not heard or, having heard, ignored him as something not worth its attention. It went on thinking about the place where the dull red sun was rising above the horizon.

It had been foolish, and perhaps presumptuous, he knew, for him to have tried to speak to it. He had never tried before; he had simply listened. And he had never tried, either, to speak to those others who talked among the stars -- again he'd simply listened.

What new dimension had been added to himself, he wondered, that would have permitted him to try to communicate with the creature? Had the possibility that he was about to die moved him?

The creature in the stone might not be subject to death -- it might be

immortal.

He crawled out of the far recess of the cave and crept out to where he had room to hunker down.

The storm had worsened. The ice now was mixed with snow and the temperature had fallen. The ledge in front of the cave was filmed with slippery ice. If a man tried to walk it he'd go plunging down the cliff face to his death.

The wind was blowing harder. The branches of the trees were waving and a storm of leaves was banking down the hillside, flying with the ice and snow.

From where he squatted he could see the topmost branches of the clump of birches which grew atop the mound just beyond where the cave tree had stood. And these branches, it seemed to him, were waving about far more violently than could be accounted for by wind. They were lashing wildly from one side to the other and even as he watched they seemed to rise higher in the air, as if the trees, in some great agony, were raising their branches far above their heads in a plea for mercy.

Daniels crept forward on his hands and knees and thrust his head out to see down to the base of the cliff.

Not only the topmost branches of the clump of birches were swaying but the entire clump seemed to be in motion, thrashing about as if some unseen hand were attempting to wrench it from the soil. But even as he thought this, he saw that the ground itself was in agitation, heaving up and out. It looked exactly as if someone had taken a time-lapse movie of the development of a frost boil with the film being run at a normal speed. The ground was heaving up and the clump was heaving with it. A shower of gravel and other debris was flowing down the slope, loosened by the heaving of the ground. A boulder broke away and crashed down the hill, crushing brush and shrubs and leaving hideous scars.

Daniels watched in horrified fascination.

Was he witnessing, he wondered, some wonderfully speeded-up

geological process? He tried to pinpoint exactly what kind of process it might be. He knew of one that seemed to fit. The mound kept on heaving upward, splintering outward from its center. A great flood of loose debris was now pouring down the slope, leaving a path of brown in the whiteness of the fallen snow. The clump of birch tipped over and went skidding down the slope and out of the place where it had stood a shape emerged.

Not a solid shape, but a hazy one that looked as if someone had scraped some stardust from the sky and molded it into a ragged, shifting form that did not set into any definite pattern, that kept shifting and changing, although it did not entirely lose all resemblance to the shape in which it might originally have been molded. It looked as a loose conglomeration of atoms might look if atoms could be seen. It sparkled softly in the grayness of the day and despite its seeming insubstantiality it apparently had some strength -- for it continued to push itself from the shattered mound until finally it stood free of it.

Having freed itself, it drifted up toward the ledge.

Strangely, Daniels felt no fear, only a vast curiosity. He tried to make out what the drifting shape was but he could not be sure.

As it reached the ledge and moved slightly above it he drew back to crouch within the cave. The shape drifted in a couple of feet or so and perched on the ledge -- either perched upon it or floated just above it.

You spoke, the sparkling shape said to Daniels.

It was not a question, nor a statement either, really, and it was not really speaking. It sounded exactly like the talk Daniels had heard when he'd listened to the stars.

You spoke to it, said the shape, _as if you were a friend_ (although the word was not friend but something else entirely, something warm and friendly). _You offered help to it. Is there help that you can give?_

That question at least was clear enough.

'I don't know,' said Daniels. 'Not right now, there isn't. But in a

hundred years from now, perhaps -- are you hearing me? Do you know what I am saying?'

You say there can be help, the creature said, _but only after time. Please, what is that time?_

'A hundred years,' said Daniels. 'When the planet goes around the star one hundred times.'

One hundred? asked the creature.

Daniels held up the fingers of both hands. 'Can you see my fingers? The appendages on the tips of my arms?'

See? the creature asked.

'Sense them. Count them.'

Yes, I can count them.

'They number ten,' said Daniels. 'Ten times that many of them would be a hundred.'

It is no great span of time, the creature said. _What kind of help by then?_

'You know genetics? How a creature comes into being, how it knows what kind of thing it is to become, how it grows, how it knows how to grow and what to become. The amino acids that make up the ribonucleic acids and provide the key to the kind of cells it grows and what their functions are.'

I do not know your terms, the creature said, _but I understand. So you know of this? You are not, then, a brute wild creature, like the other life that simply stands and the others that burrow in the ground and climb the standing life forms and run along the ground._

It did not come out like this, of course. The words were there -- or meanings that had the feel of words -- but there were pictures as well of trees, of burrowing mice, of squirrels, of rabbits, of the lurching woodchuck and the running fox.

'Not I,' said Daniels, 'but others of my kind. I know but little of it. There are others who spend all their time in the study of it.'

The other perched on the ledge and said nothing more. Beyond it the trees whipped in the wind and the snow came whirling down,

Daniels huddled back from the ledge, shivered in the cold and wondered if this thing upon the ledge could be hallucination.

But as he thought it, the thing began to talk again, although this time it did not seem to be talking to him. It talked, rather, as the creature in the stone had talked, remembering. It communicated, perhaps, something he was not meant to know, but Daniels had no way of keeping from knowing. Sentience flowed from the creature and impacted on his mind, filling all his mind, barring all else, so that it seemed as if it were he and not this other who was remembering.

5

First there was space -- endless, limitless space, so far from everything, so brutal, so frigid, so uncaring that it numbed the mind, not so much from fear or loneliness as from the realization that in this eternity of space the thing that was himself was dwarfed to an insignificance no yardstick could measure. So far from home, so lost, so directionless -- and yet not entirely directionless, for there was a trace, a scent, a spoor, a knowing that could not be expressed or understood or even guessed at in the framework of humanity; a trace, a scent, a spoor that showed the way, no matter how dimly or how hopelessly, that something else had taken at some other time. And a mindless determination, an unflagging devotion, a primal urgency that drove him on that faint, dim trail, to follow where it might lead, even to the end of time or space, or the both of them together, never to fail or quit or falter until the trail had finally reached an end or had been wiped out by whatever winds might blow through empty space.

There was something here. Daniels told himself, that, for all its alienness, still was familiar, a factor that should lend itself to translation into human terms and thus establish some sort of link between this remembering alien mind and his human mind.

The emptiness and the silence, the cold uncaring went on and on and on and there seemed no end to it. But he came to understand there had to be an end to it and that the end was here, in these tangled hills above the ancient river. And after the almost endless

time of darkness and uncaring, another almost endless time of waiting, of having reached the end, of having gone as far as one might go and then settling down to wait with an ageless patience that never would grow weary.

You spoke of help, the creature said to him. _Why help? You do not know this other. Why should you want to help?_

'It is alive,' said Daniels. 'It's alive and I'm alive and is that not enough?'

I do not know, the creature said.

'I think it is,' said Daniels.

And how could you help?

'I've told you about this business of genetics. I don't know if I can explain -- '

I have the terms from your mind, the creature said. _The genetic code._

'Would this other one, the one beneath the stone, the one you guard -- '

Not guard, the creature said. _The one I wait for._

'You will wait for long.'

I am equipped for waiting. I have waited long. I can wait much longer.

'Someday,' Daniels said, 'the stone will erode away. But you need not wait that long. Does this other creature know its genetic code?'

It knows, the creature said. _It knows far more than I._

'But all of it,' insisted Daniels. 'Down to the last linkage, the final ingredient, the sequences of all the billions of -- '

It knows, the creature said. _The first requisite of all life is to understand itself._

'And it could -- it would -- be willing to give us that information, to supply us its genetic code?'

You are presumptuous, said the sparkling creature (although the word was harder than presumptuous). _That is information no thing gives another. It is indecent and obscene_ (here again the words

were not exactly indecent and obscene). _It involves the giving of one's self into another's hands. It is an ultimate and purposeless surrender._

'Not surrender,' Daniels said. 'A way of escaping from its imprisonment. In time, in the hundred years of which I told you, the people of my race could take that genetic code and construct another creature exactly like the first. Duplicate it with exact preciseness.'

But it still would be in stone.

'Only one of it. The original one. That original could wait for the erosion of the rock. But the other one, its duplicate, could take up life again.'

And what, Daniels wondered, if the creature in the stone did not wish for rescue? What if it had deliberately placed itself beneath the stone? What if it simply sought protection and sanctuary? Perhaps, if it wished, the creature could get out of where it was as easily as this other one -- or this other thing -- had risen from the mound.

No, it cannot, said the creature squatting on the ledge. _I was careless. I went to sleep while waiting and I slept too long._

And that would have been a long sleep, Daniels told himself. A sleep so long that dribbling soil had mounded over it, that fallen boulders, cracked off the cliff by frost, had been buried in the soil and that a clump of birch had sprouted and grown into trees thirty feet high. There was a difference here in time rate that he could not comprehend.

But some of the rest, he told himself, he had sensed -- the devoted loyalty and the mindless patience of the creature that tracked another far among the stars. He knew he was right, for the mind of that other thing, that devoted star-dog perched upon the ledge, came into him and fastened on his mind and for a moment the two of them, the two minds, for all their differences, merged into a single mind in a gesture of fellowship and basic understanding, as if for the first time in what must have been millions of years this baying hound from outer space had found a creature that could understand its duty and its purpose.

'We could try to dig it out,' said Daniels. 'I had thought of that, of course, but I was afraid that it would be injured. And it would be hard to convince anyone -- '

_No_, said the creature, _digging would not do. There is much you do not understand. But this other proposal that you have, that has great merit. You say you do not have the knowledge of genetics to take this action now. Have you talked to others of your kind?_

'I talked to one,' said Daniels, 'and he would not listen. He thought I was mad. But he was not, after all, the man I should have spoken to. In time I could talk with others but not right now. No matter how much I might want to -- I can't. For they would laugh at me and I could not stand their laughter. But in a hundred years or somewhat less I could -- '

But you will not exist a hundred years, said the faithful dog. _You are a short-lived species. Which might explain your rapid rise. All life here is short-lived and that gives evolution a chance to build intelligence. When I first came here I found but mindless entities._

'You are right,' said Daniels. 'I can live no hundred years. Even from the very start, I could not live a hundred years, and better than half of my life is gone. Perhaps much more than half of it. For unless I can get out of this cave I will be dead in days.'

Reach out, said the sparkling one. _Reach out and touch me, being._

Slowly Daniels reached out. His hand went through the sparkle and the shine and he had no sense of matter -- it was as if he'd moved his hand through nothing but air.

You see, the creature said, _I cannot help you. There is no way for our energies to interact. I am sorry, friend._ (it was not friend, exactly, but it was good enough, and it might have been, Daniels thought, a great deal more than friend.)

'I am sorry, too,' said Daniels. 'I would like to live.'

Silence fell between them, the soft and brooding silence of a snow-laden afternoon with nothing but the trees and the rock and the hidden

little life to share the silence with them.

It had been for nothing, then, Daniels told himself, this meeting with a creature from another world. Unless he could somehow get off this ledge there was nothing he could do. Although why he should so concern himself with the rescue of the creature in the stone he could not understand. Surely whether he himself lived or died should be of more importance to him than that his death would foreclose any chance of help to the buried alien.

'But it may not be for nothing,' he told the sparkling creature. 'Now that you know -- '

My knowing, said the creature, _will have no effect. There are others from the stars who would have the knowledge -- but even if I could contact them they would pay no attention to me. My position is too lowly to converse with the greater ones. My only hope would be people of your kind and, if I'm not mistaken, only with yourself. For I catch the edge of thought that you are the only one who really understands. There is no other of your race who could even be aware of me._

Daniels nodded. It was entirely true. No other human existed whose brain had been jumbled so fortunately as to have acquired the abilities he held. He was the only hope for the creature in the stone and even such hope as he represented might be very slight, for before it could be made effective he must find someone who would listen and believe. And that belief must reach across the years to a time when genetic engineering was considerably advanced beyond its present state.

If you could manage to survive the present this, said the hound from outer space, _I might bring to bear certain energies and techniques -- sufficiently for the project to be carried through. But, as you must realize, I cannot supply the means to survive this crisis._

'Someone may come along,' said Daniels. 'They might hear me if I yelled every now and then.'

He began yelling every now and then and received no answer. His

yells were muffled by the storm and it was unlikely, he knew, that there would be men abroad at a time like this. They'd be safe beside their fires.

The sparkling creature still perched upon the ledge when Daniels slumped back to rest. The other made an indefinite sort of shape that seemed much like a lopsided Christmas tree standing in the snow.

Daniels told himself not to go to sleep. He must close his eyes only for a moment, then snap them open -- he must not let them stay shut for then sleep would come upon him. He should beat his arms across his chest for warmth -- but his arms were heavy and did not want to work.

He felt himself sliding prone to the cave floor and fought to drive himself erect. But his will to fight was thin and the rock was comfortable. So comfortable, he thought, that he could afford a moment's rest before forcing himself erect. And the funny thing about it was that the cave floor had turned to mud and water and the sun was shining and he seemed warm again.

He rose with a start and he saw that he was standing in a wide expanse of water no deeper than his ankles, black ooze underfoot.

There was no cave and no hill in which the cave might be. There was simply this vast sheet of water and behind him, less than thirty feet away, the muddy beach of a tiny island -- a muddy, rocky island, with smears of sickly green clinging to the rocks.

He was in another time, he knew, but not in another place. Always when he slipped through time he came to rest on exactly the same spot upon the surface of the earth that he had occupied when the change had come.

And standing there he wondered once again, as he had many times before, what strange mechanism operated to shift him bodily in space so that when he was transported to a time other than his own he did not find himself buried under, say, twenty feet of rock or soil or suspended twenty feet above the surface.

But now, he knew, was no time to think or wonder. By a strange

quirk of circumstance he was no longer in the cave and it made good sense to get away from where he was as swiftly as he could. For if he stayed standing where he was he might snap back unexpectedly to his present and find himself still huddled in the cave.

He turned clumsily about, his feet tangling in the muddy bottom, and lunged towards the shore. The going was hard but he made it and went up the slimy stretch of muddy beach until he could reach the tumbled rocks and could sit and rest.

His breathing was difficult. He gulped great lungfuls and the air had a strange taste to it, not like normal air.

He sat on the rock, gasping for breath, and gazed out across the sheet of water shining in the high, warm sun. Far out he caught sight of a long, humping swell and watched it coming in. When it reached the shore it washed up the muddy incline almost to his feet. Far out on the glassy surface another swell was forming.

The sheet of water was greater, he realized, than he had first imagined. This was also the first time in his wanderings through the past that he had ever come upon any large body of water. Always before he had emerged on dry land whose general contours had been recognizable -- and there had always been the river flowing through the hills.

Here nothing was recognizable. This was a totally different place and there could be no question that he had been projected farther back in time than ever before -- back to the day of some great epicontinental sea, back to a time, perhaps, when the atmosphere had far less oxygen than it would have in later eons. More than likely, he thought, he was very close in time to that boundary line where life for a creature such as he would be impossible. Here there apparently was sufficient oxygen, although a man must pump more air into his lungs than he would normally. Go back a few million years and the oxygen might fall to the point where it would be insufficient. Go a little farther back and find no free oxygen at all.

Watching the beach, he saw the little things skittering back and

forth, seeking refuge in spume-whitened piles of drift or popping into tiny burrows. He put his hand down on the rock on which he sat and scrubbed gently at a patch of green. It slid off the rock and clung to his flesh, smearing his palm with a slimy gelatinous mess that felt disgusting and unclean.

Here, then, was the first of life to dwell upon the land -- scarcely creatures as yet, still clinging to the edge of water, afraid and unequipped to wander too far from the side of that wet and gentle mother which, from the first beginning, had nurtured life. Even the plants still clung close to the sea, existing, perhaps, only upon rocky surfaces so close to the beach that occasional spray could reach them.

Daniels found that now he did not have to gasp quite so much for breath. Plowing through the mud up to the rock had been exhausting work in an oxygen-poor atmosphere. But sitting quietly on the rocks, he could get along all right.

Now that the blood had stopped pounding in his head he became aware of silence. He heard one sound only, the soft lapping of the water against the muddy beach, a lonely effect that seemed to emphasize rather than break the silence.

Never before in his life, he realized, had he heard so little sound. Back in the other worlds he had known there had been not one noise, but many, even on the quietest days. But here there was nothing to make a sound -- no trees, no animals, no insects, no birds -- just the water running to the far horizon and the bright sun in the sky.

For the first time in many months he knew again that sense of out-of-placeness, of not belonging, the feeling of being where he was not wanted and had no right to be, an intruder in a world that was out of bounds, not for him alone but for anything that was more complex or more sophisticated than the little skitterers on the beach.

He sat beneath the alien sun, surrounded by the alien water, watching the little things that in eons yet to come would give rise to such creatures as himself, and tried to feel some sort of kinship to the

skitterers. But he could feel no kinship.

And suddenly in this place of one-sound-only there came a throbbing, faint but clear and presently louder, pressing down against the water, beating at the little island -- a sound out of the sky.

Daniels leaped to his feet and looked up and the ship was there, plummeting down toward him. But not a ship of solid form, it seemed -- rather a distorted thing, as if many planes of light (if there could be such things as planes of light) had been slapped together in a haphazard sort of way.

A throbbing came from it that set the atmosphere to howling and the planes of light kept changing shape or changing places, so that the ship, from one moment to the next, never looked the same.

It had been dropping fast to start with but now it was slowing down as it continued to fall, ponderously and with massive deliberation, straight toward the island.

Daniels found himself crouching, unable to jerk his eyes and senses away from this mass of light and thunder that came out of the sky.

The sea and mud and rock, even in the full light of the sun, were flickering with the flashing that came from the shifting of the planes of light. Watching it through eyes squinted against the flashes, Daniels saw that if the ship were to drop to the surface it would not drop upon the island, as he first had feared, but a hundred feet or so offshore.

Not more than fifty feet above the water the great ship stopped and hovered and a bright thing came from it. The object hit the water with a splash but did not go under, coming to rest upon the shallow, muddy bottom of the sea, with a bit less than half of it above the surface. It was a sphere, a bright and shiny globe against which the water lapped, and even with the thunder of the ship beating at his ears, Daniels imagined he could hear the water lapping at the sphere.

Then a voice spoke above this empty world, above the throbbing of the ship, the imagined lapping sound of water, a sad, judicial voice -- although it could not have been a voice, for any voice would have

been too puny to be heard. But the words were there and there was no doubt of what they said:

Thus, according to the verdict and the sentence, you are here deported and abandoned upon this barren planet, where it is most devoutly hoped you will find the time and opportunity to contemplate your sins and especially the sin of (and here were words and concepts Daniels could not understand, hearing them only as a blur of sound -- but the sound of them, or something in the sound of them, was such as to turn his blood to ice and at the same time fill him with a disgust and a loathing such as he'd never known before). _It is regrettable, perhaps, that you are immune to death, for much as we might detest ourselves for doing it, it would be a kinder course to discontinue you and would serve better than this course to exact our purpose, which is to place you beyond all possibility of ever having contact with any sort of life again.. Here, beyond the farthest track of galactic intercourse, on this uncharted planet, we can only hope that our purpose will be served. And we urge upon you such self-examination that if, by some remote chance, in some unguessed time, you should be freed through ignorance or malice, you shall find it within yourself so to conduct your existence as not to meet or merit such fate again. And now, according to our law, you may speak any final words you wish._

The voice ceased and after a while came another. And while the terminology was somewhat more involved than Daniels could grasp their idiom translated easily into human terms.

Go screw yourself, it said.

The throbbing deepened and the ship began to move straight up into the sky. Daniels watched it until the thunder died and the ship itself was a fading twinkle in the blue.

He rose from his crouch and stood erect, trembling and weak. Groping behind him for the rock, he found it and sat down again.

Once again the only sound was the lapping of the water on the shore. He could not hear, as he had imagined that he could, the water

against the shining sphere that lay a hundred feet offshore. The sun blazed down out of the sky and glinted on the sphere and Daniels found that once again he was gasping for his breath.

Without a doubt, out there in the shallow water, on the mudbank that sloped up to the island, lay the creature in the stone. And how then had it been possible for him to be transported across the hundreds of millions of years to this one microsecond of time that held the answer to all the questions he had asked about the intelligence beneath the limestone? It could not have been sheer coincidence, for this was coincidence of too large an order ever to come about. Had he somehow, subconsciously, gained more knowledge than he had been aware of from the twinkling creature that had perched upon the ledge? For a moment, he remembered, their minds had met and mingled -- at that moment had there occurred a transmission of knowledge, unrecognized, buried in some corner of himself? Or was he witnessing the operation of some sort of psychic warning system set up to scare off any future intelligence that might be tempted to liberate this abandoned and marooned being? And what about the twinkling creature? Could some hidden, unguessed good exist in the thing imprisoned in the sphere -- for it to have commanded the loyalty and devotion of the creature on the ledge beyond the slow erosion of geologic ages? The question raised another: What were good and evil? Who was there to judge?

The evidence of the twinkling creature was, of course, no evidence at all. No human being was so utterly depraved that he could not hope to find a dog to follow him and guard him even to the death.

More to wonder at was what had happened within his own jumbled brain that could send him so unerringly to the moment of a vital happening. What more would he find in it to astonish and confound him? How far along the path to ultimate understanding might it drive him? And what was the purpose of that driving?

He sat on the rock and gasped for breath. The sea lay flat and calm beneath the blazing sun, its only motion the long swells running in to

break around the sphere and on the beach. The little skittering creatures ran along the mud and he rubbed his palm against his trouser leg, trying to brush off the green and slimy scum.

He could wade out, he thought, and have a closer look at the sphere lying in the mud. But it would be a long walk in such an atmosphere and he could not chance it -- for he must be nowhere near the cave up in that distant future when he popped back to his present.

Once the excitement of knowing where he was, the sense of out-of-placeness, had worn off, this tiny mud-flat island was a boring place. There was nothing but the sky and sea and the muddy beach; there was nothing much to look at. It was a place, he thought, where nothing ever happened, or was about to happen once the ship had gone away and the great event had ended. Much was going on, of course, that in future ages would spell out to quite a lot -- but it was mostly happening out of sight, down at the bottom of this shallow sea. The skittering things, he thought, and the slimy growth upon the rock were hardy, mindless pioneers of this distant day -- awesome to look upon and think about but actually not too interesting.

He began drawing aimless patterns in the mud with the toe of one boot. He tried to make a tic-tac-toe layout but so much mud was clinging to his toe that it didn't quite come out.

And then, instead of drawing in the mud, he was scraping with his toe in fallen leaves, stiff with frozen sleet and snow.

The sun was gone and the scene was dark except for a glow from something in the woods just down the hill from him. Driving sheets of snow swirled into his face and he shivered. He pulled his jacket close about him and began to button it. A man, he thought, could catch his death of cold this way, shifting as quickly as he had shifted from a steaming mudbank to the whiplash chill of a northern blizzard.

The yellow glow still persisted on the slope below him and he could hear the sound of human voices. What was going on? He was fairly certain of where he was, a hundred feet or so above the place where

the cliff began -- there should be no one down there; there should not be a light.

He took a slow step down the hill, then hesitated. He ought not to be going down the hill -- he should be heading straight for home. The cattle would be waiting at the barnyard gate, hunched against the storm, their coats covered with ice and snow, yearning for the warmth and shelter of the barn. The pigs would not have been fed, nor the chickens either. A man owed some consideration to his livestock.

But someone was down there, someone with a lantern, almost on the lip of the cliff. If the damn fools didn't watch out, they could slip and go plunging down into a hundred feet of space. Coon hunters more than likely, although this was not the kind of night to be out hunting coon. The coons would all be denned up.

But whoever they might be, he should go down and warn them.

He was halfway to the lantern, which appeared to be setting on the ground, when someone picked it up and held it high and Daniels saw and recognized the face of the man who held it.

Daniels hurried forward.

'Sheriff, what are you doing here?'

But he had the shamed feeling that he knew, that he should have known from the moment he had seen the light.

'Who is there?' the sheriff asked, wheeling swiftly and tilting the lantern so that its rays were thrown in Daniels' direction. 'Daniels,' he gasped. 'Good God, man, where have you been?'

'Just walking around,' said Daniels weakly. The answer, he knew, was no good at all -- but how could he tell anyone that he had just returned from a trip through time?

'Damn it,' the sheriff said, disgusted. 'We've been hunting you. Ben Adams got scared when he dropped over to your place and you weren't there. He knows how you go walking around in the woods and he was afraid something had happened to you. So he phoned me, and he and his boys began looking for you. We were afraid you had fallen or had been hurt somehow. A man wouldn't last the night in a

storm like this.'

'Where is Ben now?' asked Daniels.

The sheriff gestured down the hill and Daniels saw that two men, probably Adams' sons, had a rope snubbed around a tree and that the rope extended down over the cliff.

'He's down on the rope,' the sheriff said. 'Having a look in the cave. He felt somehow you might be in the cave.'

'He had good reason to -- ' Daniels started to say but he had barely begun to speak when the night was rent by a shriek of terror. The shrieking did not stop. It kept on and on. The sheriff thrust the lantern at Daniels and hurried forward.

No guts, Daniels thought. A man who could be vicious enough to set up another for death, to trap him in a cave -- but who, when the chips were down, could not go through with it and had to phone the sheriff to provide a witness to his good intentions -- a man like that lacked guts.

The shrieks had fallen to moaning. The sheriff hauled on the rope, helped by one of Adams' sons. A man's head and shoulders appeared above the cliff top and the sheriff reached out and hauled him to safety.

Ben Adams collapsed on the ground and never stopped his moaning. The sheriff jerked him to his feet.

'What's the matter, Ben?'

'There's something down there,' Adams screamed. 'There is something in the cave -- '

'Something, damn it? What would it be? A cat? A panther?'

'I never seen it. I just knew that it was there. I felt it. It was crouched back inside the cave.'

'How could anything be in there? Someone cut down the tree. How could anything get into the cave?'

'I don't know,' howled Adams. 'It might have been in there when the tree was cut. It might have been trapped in there.'

One of the sons was holding Ben erect and the sheriff moved away.

The other son was puffing in the rope and neatly coiling it.

'Another thing,' the sheriff said, 'how come you thought Daniels might be in that cave? If the tree was cut down he couldn't have used a rope the way you did, for there wasn't any rope. If he had used a rope it would still have been there. I don't know what's going on -- damned if I do. You down messing in that cave and Daniels comes walking out of the woods. I wish someone would tell me.'

Adams, who had been hobbling forward, saw Daniels for the first time and came to a sudden halt.

'Where did you come from?' he demanded. 'Here we been wearing out our guts trying to hunt you down and then -- '

'Oh, go on home,' the sheriff said in a disgusted tone of voice. 'There's a fishy smell to this. It's going to take me a little while to get it figured out.'

Daniels reached out his hand to the son who had finished coiling the rope.

'I believe that's my rope,' he said.

Without protest, taken by surprise, the boy handed it to him.

'We'll cut across the woods,' said Ben. 'Home's closer that way.'

'Good night, men,' the sheriff said.

Slowly the sheriff and Daniels climbed the hill.

'Daniels,' said the sheriff, 'you were never out walking in this storm. If you had been you'd have had a whole lot more snow on you than shows. You look like you just stepped from a house.'

'Maybe I wasn't exactly walking around,' Daniels said.

'Would you mind telling me where you were? I don't mind doing my duty as I see it but I don't relish being made to look a fool while I'm doing it.'

'Sheriff, I can't tell you. I'm sorry. I simply cannot tell you.'

'All right, then. What about the rope?'

'It's my rope,' said Daniels. 'I lost it this afternoon.'

'And I suppose you can't tell me about that, either.'

'No, I guess I can't.'

'You know,' the sheriff said, 'I've had a lot of trouble with Ben Adams through the years. I'd hate to think I was going to have trouble with you, too.'

They climbed the hill and walked up to the house. The sheriff's car was parked out on the road.

'Would you come in?' asked Daniels. 'I could find a drink.'

The sheriff shook his head. 'Some other time,' he said. 'Maybe soon. You figure there was something in that cave? Or was it just Ben's imagination? He's a flighty sort of critter.'

'Maybe there wasn't anything,' said Daniels. 'but if Ben thought there was, what difference does it make? Thinking it might be just as real as if there were something there. All of us, sheriff, live with things walking by our sides no one else can see.'

The sheriff shot a quick glance at him. 'Daniels, what's with you?' he asked. 'What is walking by your side or sniffing at your heels? Why did you bury yourself out here in this Godforsaken place? What is going on?'

He didn't wait for an answer. He got into his car, started it and headed down the road.

Daniels stood in the storm and watched the glowing taillights vanish in the murk of flying snow. He shook his head in bewilderment. The sheriff had asked a question and then had not waited for the answer. Perhaps because it was a question to which he did not want an answer.

Daniels turned and went up the snowy path to the house. He'd like some coffee and a bite to eat -- but first he had to do the chores. He had to milk the cows and feed the pigs. The chickens must wait till morning -- it was too late to feed the chickens. The cows would be waiting at the barn door.

They had waited for a long time and it was not right to make them wait.

He opened the door and stepped into the kitchen.

Someone was waiting for him. It sat on the table or floated so close

above it that it seemed to be sitting. The fire in the stove had gone out and the room was dark but the creature sparkled.

You saw? the creature asked.

'Yes,' said Daniels. 'I saw and heard. I don't know what to do. What is right or wrong? Who knows what's right or wrong?'

Not you, the creature said. _Not I. I can only wait. I can only keep the faith._

Perhaps among the stars, thought Daniels, might be those who did know. Perhaps by listening to the stars, perhaps by trying to break in on their conversations and by asking questions, he might get an answer. Certainly there must be some universal ethics. A list, perhaps, of Universal Commandments. Maybe not ten of them. Maybe only two or three -- but any number might be enough.

'I can't stay and talk,' he said. 'I have animals to take care of. Could you stick around? Later we can talk.'

He fumbled for the lantern on the bench against the wall, found the matches on the shelf. He lit the lantern and its feeble flame made a puddle of light in the darkness of the room.

You have others to take care of? asked the creature. _Others not quite like yourself? Others, trusting you, without your intelligence?_

'I guess you could say it that way,' Daniels said, 'I've never heard it put quite that way before.'

Could I go along with you? the creature asked, _it occurs to me, just now, that in many ways we are very much alike._

'Very much -- ' But with the sentence hanging in the air, Daniels stopped.

Not a hound, he told himself. Not the faithful dog. But the shepherd. Could that be it? Not the master but the long-lost lamb?

He reached out a hand towards the creature in a swift gesture of understanding, then pulled it back, remembering it was nothing he could touch.

He lifted the lantern and turned toward the door.

'Come along,' he said.

Together the two of them went through the storm toward the barn and the waiting cows.